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Allegiances

RobinClan

Leader: Sparkstar - black and white tom with olive green eyes

Deputy: Vixenpool - ginger she-cat with white chest and paws and hazel eyes

Medicine Cat: Skylark - white she-cat with clashing brown patches and one blue, one green eye

Warriors:

Alderwing - dark ginger calico she-cat with a white muzzle and pale green eyes

Sparrowberry - red-brown deaf fluffy she-cat with sky-blue eyes

Kestrelflame - pale ginger she-cat with thick fur and burning amber eyes

Squishypelt - ginger tom with hazel eyes and white muzzle and belly

Creekstorm - black she-cat with clear blue eyes and folded ears

Moosebloom - light grey she-cat with white and darker grey spots and patches and dark, royal blue eyes

Mistleswoop - dark grey she-cat with vibrant green eyes and missing front right leg

Puddlesoar - blue-grey tabby tom with scar on his side and blue eyes

Defenders:

Trailblaze - ginger and white white tom with amber eyes, ginger

splotches and scar on leg

Crowpelt - black tom with crow feathers behind ear and grey eyes

Laurelcall - white medium-furred tom with dark amber eyes, grey chin, leaves in pelt

Eggnogshine - fluffy golden tabby tom with long ears, lighter chest and blue eyes

Flashflood - dark ginger calico she-cat with white paws and forest green eyes

Kiteheart - fluffy brown tabby tom with soft red bandana and hazel eyes

Young Cats:

Twitch - sleek grey she-cat with green eyes

Eevee - short brown tom with white chest and tail tip, and violet eyes

Splash - dilute tortoiseshell tom with ice blue eyes

Lichen - dark ginger and brown tabby she-cat with green eyes and wide ears

Trickle - fawn tom with white markings and blue eyes

Queens:

Chasecloud - sleek silver she-cat with tortoiseshell stripes, electric blue eyes and scar on tail (mate: Kiteheart)

Elders:

Stormfall - dappled blue-grey tom with stormy grey eyes

Miloheart - frail dark brown tom with amber eyes

MarshClan

Leader: Oakstar - brown speckled tom with black paws and yellow eyes

Deputy: Clayrain - dark ginger tabby tom with tufted ears and cloudy blue eyes (temporarily training Sparkstar, Vixenpool, Kestrelflame, Chasecloud)

Medicine Cat: Scruffyheart - medium-grey furry tom with amber eyes

Apprentice: Hurricanepaw

Warriors:

Silverfern - silver tabby she-cat with dark green eyes

Apprentice: Tanglepaw

Duskdream - black she-cat with fiery amber eyes (temporarily training Squishypelt, Sparrowberry, Puddlesoar)

Swampwhisker - ginger tabby tom with periwinkle eyes

Apprentice: Willowpaw

Ashleaf - grey speckled she-cat with violet eyes

Riverbranch - golden tabby tom with white speckles and cyan eyes (temporarily training Alderwing, Creekstorm, Moosebloom, Mistleswoop)

Defenders:

Bayfur - sleek brown tom with dark green eyes

Drizzleleaf - pale ginger she-cat with pale green eyes

Hivecloud - light brown tom with periwinkle eyes

Apprentices:

Hurricanepaw - yellow long-furred tabby she-cat with stormy grey eyes

Tanglepaw - cream tom with long legs and golden eyes

Willowpaw - ginger tabby tom with curly fur and blue eyes

Twigpaw - blue-grey she-cat with long tail and pale blue eyes

Queens:

Frondheart - pale grey she-cat with white spots and amber eyes (mate: Riverbranch)

Cindersplash - white and ginger she-cat with green eyes (mate: Oakstar, kit: Redkit, dark ginger and brown she-kit with yellow eyes)

Elders:

Ravenspring - dark-grey tom with black chest and tail fur

SnowyClan

Leader: Driftstar - white she-cat with black patches and bright blue eyes

Deputy: Everdash - golden she-cat with white paws and hazel eyes

Medicine Cat: Avalanchefall - white tom with blue eyes (temporarily training Skylark)

Warriors:

Bushytail - brown tabby she-cat with forest green eyes

Bearheart - chocolate-brown muscular tom with soft amber eyes

Mountainsong - silver tom with green eyes

Apprentice: Fluffypaw

Thunderwish - white-and-brown she-cat with yellow eyes

Havensky - grey and white tom with silver eyes

Defenders:

Icedawn - grey-and-white tom with grey eyes

Apprentice: Leafpaw

Sagefrost - white she-cat with blue-grey rosettes and blue eyes

Forestleap - brown and ginger tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice: Hailpaw

Apprentices:

Fluffypaw - white tom with hazel eyes

Hailpaw - light grey tom with a white-tipped tail and amber eyes

Leafpaw - grey tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Queens:

Wolfstorm - pale grey she-cat with white spots and amber eyes (mate: unknown, kits: Rockykit, grey tom-kit with brown eyes, and Coldkit, white tom-kit with dark blue eyes)

Elders:

Sweetheart - yellow she-cat with pale green eyes

CavernClan

Leader: Duskstar - sleek black she-cat with a brown tinge to her fur and yellow eyes

Deputy: Nightfall - black tom with midnight-blue eyes

Medicine Cat: Juniperivy - calico she-cat with golden eyes

Warriors:

Lakepool - coffee-brown she-cat with light blue eyes

Lightwing - white tom with yellow eyes

Apprentice: Flintpaw

Honeybee - cream she-cat with amber eyes

Streamfoot - ginger tom with moss-green eyes

Muddywhisker - brown and white tabby she-cat with hazel eyes

Defenders:

Bubblingsplash - blue-grey tom with amber eyes

Apprentice: Foxpaw

Chestnutear - dusty brown tabby tom with white streaks and green eyes (temporarily training Eggnogshine, Flashflood, Laurelcall)

Runningburrow - pale brown tabby she-cat with brown eyes (temporarily training Crowpelt, Trailblaze, Kiteheart)

Apprentices:

Foxpaw - dark ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Flintpaw - dark speckled grey tom with a white-tipped tail and blue eyes

Queens:

Hopesand - light tabby grey she-cat with a white muzzle and amber eyes (mate: Lightwing, kits: Gorsekit, black she-cat with green eyes, and Emberkit, tortoiseshell tabby she-cat with blue eyes)

Dreamsong - blue-grey she-cat with violet eyes (mate: Bubblingsplash, kits: Bluekit, blue-grey she-cat with pale violet eyes, and Blackkit, black tom with amber eyes)

Elders:

Nightwatcher - silver tom with midnight blue eyes

Prologue

Under the howling leaf-bare winds, a dark tabby crouched by his pale, dusky brown mate. "Please just eat something," he pleaded. "Don't make me stuff it down your throat."

The cat gave a weak purr. "How much is there left on the fresh-kill pile?"

The tabby's voice dropped, shaking with frustration. "A couple of frozen birds." How could that be all his cats had to eat this season? The cats put under his care, who he was responsible for?

"Give it to Ravenspring." The small brown she-cat pushed his paw away, forcing a smile. "The cold can't be good for his old bones, anyway." She spoke fondly of her old mentor.

The tabby frowned, then listened as a low grumble came from his mate's stomach. She was hungry. He knew she loved the Clan just as much as him, that she would do anything to protect them. Even give up what little food she could have eaten to the other cats.

Tears sprang to his eyes. "You haven't eaten for days."

His mate gave a low, resolute sigh as she took a bite of the bird he gave her. A smile curled her lips, but he saw her ribs showing clearly through her pelt and knew that she was almost starved to death. There was no saving her. *No! Of course there is, she just needs to eat!*

"I'm sorry, my love." The dusky she-cat almost sounded weaker now, her voice heavy. "We have never encountered such a hard leaf-bare, and I have lived many good seasons. The Clan will live on for seasons and seasons more." She managed to touch her nose to his before the life faded from her blue eyes and her head fell to the reed-woven nest.

A cry engulfed him as he watched, burying his nose in her still-

warm fur. His heart felt like it had shattered into a million pieces. Maybe, just maybe, there was still a herb that would save her? A herb that would bring life back, just for a few more moments, so he could see her alive again.

He did not know how long he lay there, lapping at her fur, barely acknowledging his belly's own cry of hunger. Only when a cat padded to the entrance did he turn his eyes away.

"Is there anything you can do?" His words were a choked plea.

The other cat frowned and shook his head. "She's dead," he said in an infuriatingly calm voice. "I can only prepare the herbs for the vigil."

The tabby's blue eyes flashed. "What kind of medicine cat are you? The Clan is suffering this leaf-bare, and you can't even help them. Why didn't you make her eat something? She would have listened to you." He spat the words out. Maybe they weren't true, but it was easier having someone else to blame. Anger flared like fire in his brain.

"I do what I can," the black-and-brown tom mewed in the same annoyingly matter-of-fact way.

The tabby tom lashed his tail against the tall grass. He couldn't let any cat suffer like this again, the way they had all been this season. He was going to do everything in his power to make sure no one died like this again. His throat raw with grief, he padded outside, paws as heavy as stone.

Still he forced himself to keep moving. To do something, anything to ease the situation, since the mouse-hearted medicine cat was clearly incapable of that.

I promise I'll continue to take care of them for you.

***

The sunhigh clouds drifted lazily over the wide canopy of leaves overhead, scarcely representing Oakstar's pounding heart as Duskstar and Driftstar emerged from the bushes into the Gathering

Place. Fresh grass covered in red and amber leaves swayed beneath their paws as they made their way into the tall grass of Threesteps. *Greenleaf will be ending soon,* Oakstar noted.

He was glad they came. The Clan leaders now had something important to discuss--a large group of cats in need of a home, and one they could provide! He was certain he could persuade the others as well. Oakstar glanced at his companion's distrustful expression and brushed his pelt gently against the other's black-and-white one.

"Don't look so worried, Spark!"

Spark's olive green eyes ringed with exhaustion. "I'm not worried. If you think this is the right home for us, I believe you."

Oakstar dipped his head. "You all deserve a home after travelling so far. And I see no life more noble than that of a Clan cat."

The former kittypet nodded vaguely. Oakstar was not sure if he really understood what it meant to be a Clan, but no matter. He was sure his group would pick it up soon enough.

The CavernClan and SnowyClan leaders sat facing them in the tall grass. "We're here Oakstar," Duskstar meowed flatly. "What was so important that you couldn't wait till the next Gathering to tell us?" The sleek black she-cat's fur looked ruffled.

Oakstar shot an apologetic glance at her. The CavernClan cats were the only Clan to sleep long hours through the day and do most of their duties between dusk and dawn. In his enthusiasm, he admittedly hadn't thought about that when he called the meeting.

"And who is this?" Driftstar sniffed curiously at Spark's fur. The black-and-white cat flinched away. "He's not a Clan cat!"

Oakstar met their gazes. "This is Spark. He comes from Twolegplace beyond the Starspray. He came with quite a large group of cats which my patrol found at the border, in search of a home they could settle in."

And they're all former kittypets, rogues and loners, the brown speckled

tabby remembered Spark saying. They had all looked thin and tired when he saw them at the border. Oakstar had been amazed that a group like that would have travelled so far together.

"A rogue group?" Duskstar's yellow eyes grew sharp and alert.

Oakstar shook his head. "No, they are not here to cause trouble. I told you, they travelled in search of a place to settle down. And the forest is quite a nice place, wouldn't you agree?"

"I certainly would," Driftstar piped up.

Duskstar shot her a bemused look before turning to fix her gaze on Spark again. "So...what exactly are you saying?"

Oakstar nudged Spark, encouraging him to speak. The patched-tom straightened up. "We tried to settle in quite a few places before, but prey was few and wild animals would come and tear our camp apart. So we have gotten used to sleeping in trees instead to be away from predators."

"And no-cat's-land has a dense forest of trees," Oakstar finished, feeling a sense of pride for Spark.

Duskstar frowned thoughtfully at the rogue. "Okay, but...why do you even want to be a Clan? It's not all sunshine and flowers, you know. It can get really tough. Why not just return to your Twolegs?"

Spark's olive eyes flashed, his fur standing on end. "Living with Twolegs ends you up in a den with tough bramble caves. I fought so hard to escape. Do you think I'd ever go back?" Betrayal laced his words, before his pelt smoothed over again moments later. He took a deep breath. "Oakstar promised that we would be safe here as warriors."

The three leaders were silenced by the young cat's words. Oakstar felt a surge of protection and indignance for Spark, and he guessed Duskstar felt the same, because she dipped her head. "Do whatever you want, Oakstar. CavernClan has no use for no-cat's land either way."

"I'm fine with it as well," Driftstar added with an amused purr.

"Wait. If no-cat's land is their territory now, where will your Clans use for extra hunting?" Duskstar brought up with narrowed eyes. "Certainly not CavernClan territory."

Oakstar tilted his head, that was a good point. The land was the only reason MarshClan had survived last leaf-bare at all, although a few of his cats had died of the lack of prey. And SnowyClan often used it for hunting during greenleaf as well... Oakstar was surprised when Spark spoke up again.

"We hunt in the treetops," the cat meowed as if it was the most natural thing in the world. "if needed, MarshClan and SnowyClan can use our ground to catch prey. Maybe right up until Bigroots?"

Driftstar nodded eagerly, regarding Spark with admiring eyes. "Hey, this cat is smart."

To Oakstar's relief, Duskstar shrugged and flicked her ears in acceptance. "I'm just glad someone's not going to hoard the land anymore," the leader muttered under her breath. Oakstar wasn't sure, but he thought he saw the sleek black cat flick her eyes toward him. He shrugged it off. He wasn't the kind of cat to question things, anyway. "It's settled, then? I can take some of my warriors to teach his cats the warrior code." The brown speckled tom tilted his head to Duskstar. "And could you spare a couple defenders?"

The CavernClan leader hesitated, then nodded.

"I can ask Avalanchefall to train the medicine cat," Driftstar drew a paw over her ear nonchalantly. "SnowyClan is in good health this season."

"When is it not," Duskstar grumbled under her breath.

Oakstar was pleased with how the meeting had gone. Driftstar and Duskstar had both agreed, and Spark blinked at the three leaders gratefully, so Oakstar flicked his tail to bring the meeting to an end. "Thank you both for coming."

Without another word, the sound of rustling leaves filled the

clearing as the four cats disappeared back into the bushes and headed for their own territory.

Chapter 1

"Good sunhigh, Skye!" Trailblaze yowled out from where he sat, paws rubbing together restlessly on the guard branch. The sunhigh light filtered through the leaves, turning part of his pelt a blazing colour.

Skylark looked up at him. She honestly wondered why the ginger tom had chosen to be a defender instead of a warrior. Maybe upkeeping the camp was fine, but guarding it didn't seem like the best job for the most distracted cat in their group.

"It's Skylark now, remember?" she answered stiffly.

Trailblaze sat upright. "Oh, right! The whole 'warrior name' thing. Isn't it funny? Why weren't we allowed to keep the name we've lived our whole lives with?" The defender suddenly jumped to his paws, looking sheepish. "Which reminds me, I'm on guard duty. Guard guard."

Skylark had no idea how to respond to him. She rarely did—most cats didn't take the time to make small talk with her, but she honestly did not mind. She glanced down at the flowers and interesting plants she had been gathering in her jaws. Plants were much more interesting.

She slid past Trailblaze and into the camp area of the treetops. Most cats were out training with either MarshClan or CavernClan cats, learning to hunt and fight like those in the forest apparently loved to do.

None of it makes sense, Skylark thought as she plucked a bright yellow flower from a tree branch with a smile. If you were going to live in a forest, why not enjoy it instead of fussing over prey? This wasn't like the meadow where they had tried to settle down before. The forest seemed to go on forever. She was sure there was enough to go around; and not to mention, the scenery here was so pretty.

Skylark stretched, her white-and-brown fur rippling along her back. After the past couple of days of settling down after their journey, cats from other Clans had come to RobinClan to teach the group how to live as warriors. But neither being a warrior or defender had sounded very appealing to her.

Now, she watched the youngest cats in the Clan leap from branch to branch in laughter.

"Can't catch me!" Trickle, the plump fawn tom, squealed.

Eevee snickered before sending a shower of leaves raining over the plump ginger tom. "You underestimate my power!"

Twitch, a wiry grey she-cat, ducked to avoid the leaves. She stared a little nervously at Trickle who was now attacking Eevee vigorously with his hind paws.

The youngest cats had been the only ones to keep their old names. Skylark wondered how they already seemed to get along so well, despite Twitch and Eevee joining the Clan separately from Lichen, Splash, and Trickle's family.

Her gaze drifted to the newly formed prey hole, stored in a hollow crevice in the trunk of the Great Tree. Realising that her belly was rumbling, Skylark padded lightly over to it.

The dawn patrol had apparently come back while she was out. Squishypelt and Puddlesoar now lay talking between branches, and Sparrowberry was watching the defenders train with a curious expression.

Vixenpool paced beside the reddish-brown she-cat. "Do you need any help, Sparrow?" the deputy asked, signing with her tail. Sparrowberry looked over and shook her head, smiling cheerily as she signed something back. Despite travelling with these cats for a moon, Skylark had never learned to sign. She had figured that they would all eventually part ways once they found a home.

I guess that's not happening anymore, she thought wryly.

Vixenpool sighed deeply and wrapped her white tail over her legs.

"I guess so. Deputy duties are just way harder than I thought." The lithe she-cat shook her head as the red-brown she-cat signed something else. "You know the Clan chose me. I can't...I can't let them down."

Skylark turned away and grabbed a hummingbird from the prey hole. Vixenpool was moons younger than her and already in such an important position. Although, did it matter that much? The cats had all been equals on the journey, none more important than each other—except maybe the elders. Puddlesoar had hunted for every cat, and Crowpelt, Trailblaze, and Laurelcall had guarded the camp on many nights. Every cat had helped play their part. *Every cat except me.* Skylark shook her head as she pushed the thought and the guilt that came along with it away.

Just as she bit into her hummingbird, Sparkstar appeared in front of her. Her tail twitched with surprise. *What could the leader want with me?*

"Skylark," Sparkstar started, drawing his claws through the dirt lightly. "Can you be the Clan medicine cat?" Before Skylark could ask him what that was, the black-and-white tom continued. "A medicine cat uses herbs to cure their Clanmates of ailments and heals them instead of participating in battles."

"They also share tongues with WishClan." The soft voice came from a fluffy white tom who smiled gently at her. Sparkstar narrowed his eyes doubtfully but didn't comment. "You're the best fit for the job Skylark. I've seen your interest in plants."

"They...pick herbs? No hunting or fighting?"

The fluffy tom nodded. "Of course. But if you don't want to be stuck in a den all day fretting over sick cats, or receiving visions from WishClan, or hunting for plants instead of prey, you don't have t—"

Skylark leaped to her paws, pelt buzzing with excitement. The role sounded almost too good to be true. "I'll do it!"

The tom's resulting smile was dazzling. Skylark found herself gazing at him as Sparkstar cleared his throat. "Very well then, and thank

you. I'll leave you two to training." The leader turned and padded towards Stormfall, leaving Skylark with the other cat.

The cat dipped his head to her. Skylark noticed a leaf was tucked behind his floppy ear. "I'm Avalanchefall, medicine cat of SnowyClan. Driftstar to train you." He gazed out at the forest view before turning back to her. "This is nice, but we should probably get started. Will you come herb-gathering with me?"

Skylark finished her fresh-kill and padded with him, making her way back to the ground with ease. The branches were firm under her paws and leaves and moss brushed her pelt as she darted from tree to tree until she was on the ground again. Then she noticed Avalanchefall wasn't beside her anymore.

The fluffy white cat was still on the higher branches, easing his way down gently on each branch. *Oh, that's right—not every cat is as familiar with trees.*

When he finally reached the grassy ground, he shook out his pelt. "Sorry. My Clanmates say I move like a badger."

"You do," Skylark mewed jokingly, making Avalanchefall purr with amusement. The sound delighted her more than she expected.

"Come on. Let me tell you about WishClan while we search for herbs. He took a deep sniff and Skylark followed, intrigued. All kinds of scents rushed into her nose: flowers, grass, squirrel, mouse, bark, and more that she couldn't tell.

Avalanchefall pointed his nose to the stream a few fox-tails away. "There. Do you smell that strong sweet scent? It also kind of smells like sour nettles, right?" He paused to let Skylark catch on to the scent. "That's marigold. Good for infection and bleeding."

Bright yellow-orange petals stuck out cheerfully by the stream. Avalanchefall carefully plucked a stalk with his teeth. "See? Now I'll tell you about WishClan."

"I heard you mentioning it," Skylark frowned. "What is it?"

"Not it. Them," Avalanchefall corrected. "They are our warrior

ancestors, where warriors' spirits go when they die. They guide our paws, and at night you can see them as stars." He looked up into the canopy of leaves. "And for us medicine cats they give us omens and signs when our Clan is in trouble or we could use a bit of guidance."

Skylark's eyes widened with interest. Was he being serious? Cats living after death? Never had she heard of such a thing before.

"Look at the birds, and the water, and the grass. They can send messages anytime. We just have to pay attention." Avalanchefall looked at her cheerfully. "And if we don't, well, we'll find out anyway...maybe a bit too late."

A purr rumbled in Skylark's chest as she picked the marigold in her teeth.

Avalanchefall felt easy to be around, unlike the other cats in RobinClan. The things he talked about felt like magic. "Can I talk to WishClan?"

Avalanchefall nodded. "Every half-moon us medicine cats meet at the Starspray to share with WishClan. Sparkstar has been taken there by Oakstar to get his wish, I think."

"Wish?" Skylark asked, amazed. "They can do that?"

"Yep, they grant all new leaders a wish," Avalanchefall confirmed. He held up his bunch of stalks and nodded. "That should be enough. Come on, I'll show you more."

As he turned to pad towards a patch of plants, Skylark found herself wondering what her wish would be. To be back as a stray? No, the Twolegs had been nice, but now she had a whole forest to explore and trees to dart around in. And an afterlife that could guide her paws. She looked back at Avalanchefall, feeling a strange warmth come over her.

Who needs a wish anyway?

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After the medicine cats had gathered all the basic herbs, they

climbed back up to camp. Skylark moved carefully so as not to drop any of the precious stalks.

"The medicine cats are back," she heard Crowpelt announce. His guard shift must have been over, because he darted up to them, Trailblaze at his side.

"We have a tree for you, medicine cats!" Trailblaze meowed. He twitched his tail proudly at a small ash tree, with plenty of holes and crevices in the trunk. Right where the trunk split into branches, two well-made nests were woven out of sticks.

"That looks amazing." Avalanchefall gave them an easy smile. "Looks like you've been learning a lot."

"Yep. But all Laurelcall seems to learn is how to flirt with Flashflood." Trailblaze shot a teasing look to his friend, who licked at his chest fur. Flashflood narrowed her dark green eyes with a hiss and looked away.

The camp felt different with Avalanchefall around. After dropping off their herbs in the medicine tree, the medicine cats settled on a warm branch on the Great Tree.

Skylark noticed the hunting patrol climb back up to camp from the ground. Kestrelflame squared her wide shoulders as she ambled onto the oak tree, Mistleswoop raised her prey-filled jaws in satisfaction, while Chasecloud raced up to meet her mate Kiteheart. Despite expecting his kits, the tortoiseshell she-cat was still full of energy.

Avalanchefall started popping the berries they collected into his mouth.

"Hey!" Skylark stared at him in shock. "Didn't you say those berries were 'very important'?"

The SnowyClan tom smiled sheepishly, pushing a few over to her. "They are! How can you guys live without snacks?"

To her surprise, a purr rose in Skylark's throat. Once she lapped up a red berry, the sweet juice burst in her mouth. It was gone as fast

as she had eaten it, but she had to admit that it did make for a good snack.

Avalanchefall must have seen her smile because he matched it with a calm one of his own. "You can share some with your friends," he mewed lightheartedly.

Her brown ears flicked back. "I don't—" Skylark stopped herself, embarrassment suddenly flooding her pelt. What would he say if he really knew her?

Avalanchefall narrowed his blue eyes. Skylark worried for a second that she had upset him in some way. Was he disappointed that he had gotten a total outcast for an apprentice? Had she messed things up with the funniest, kindest cat she had ever met?

She jolted as she felt a rasping tongue draw over her head. Avalanchefall had inched closer, and Skylark could feel his long white fur brush her pelt. He groomed her gently as she stilled, unsure of how to react.

Was this sharing tongues? Skylark had seen cats do it before; Creekstorm and Squishypelt and their kits, Alderwing and Flashflood, Trailblaze and Crowpelt. But never in her life had she imagined herself in their place.

Skylark felt her heart beat against her chest. Against her instincts, she touched her muzzle to Avalanchefall's chest fur. He wrapped his tail around her, curling softly, as she joined him.

Chapter 2

Twitch was running.

Darting back and forth through the treetops, feeling bark beneath her paws as she leaped silently from branch to branch. Her green eyes scanned the auburn leaves for good hiding spots—she was glad her short-furred pelt was a nice medium grey, letting her blend in with just about anything.

But some make it easier than the rest. Twitch spotted a tree with long roots—or tendrils?— and hurtled towards it. She breathed in the soft scent of the dirt, singing with forest flavor, as she nestled herself into a space within the roots.

"Ready or not!" Eevee's call was bright and chirpy, yet had that mischievous hint that always sounded like he was up to no good. Twitch nestled herself deeper, claws digging into the dirt. Her heart pounded, but she realised it was from exhilaration instead of terror.

Pawsteps battered the ground around her as the other young cats descended from the treetops. "Twitch! Come out wherever you are," came Eevee's playful voice.

Twitch heard sniffing noises. "Her scent is fresh." The steady, thoughtful mew was Splash's. Twitch stiffened and willed herself to stay still and not laugh.

"Hunting her like prey!" A teasing meow piped up. "I vote we hunt for real since we're down here. Trickle will be hungry when he wakes up." Lichen's tone was snarky as always.

Being careful not to make a sound, Twitch slipped from her hiding spot. This was part of their game; if the hiders managed to sneak up on the seeker without getting caught, they won. The wiry she-cat snuck behind the others, muscles trembling with anticipation. "Surprise."

Eevee turned in shock, flicking his tail back and forth as he finally spotted her. "Aw, are you serious? We've been here *two days* and you've already found the best hiding spots!"

"You might be the only one with the power to prank him, Twitch, if you'd actually do it." Lichenpaw padded back towards them, a vole caught in her jaws. She dropped it before her brother, and Splash eagerly tore it into three parts to share, saving one for Trickle.

"I doubt so." Twitch had seen a *lot* of Eevee's pranks by now and knew he could get away with pretty much anything.

Eevee puffed out his chest. "Pranking a pranker is *not* a good idea. But you're undefeated, Twitch! At least for now." He gave her a mischievous look, and Twitch felt pride warming her pelt.

Just then the rustle of grass filled the air as Alderwing, Creekstorm, Moosebloom, and the MarshClan deputy Clayrain appeared in sight. Moosebloom pranced up to them in her usual way and greeted them with a friendly wave of her tail. "Hey! What are you guys up to today?"

"Hide and seek," Splash explained. "Twitch won, of course."

Moosebloom purred, giving Twitch a smile that made her pelt prickle. She got along with the other young cats just fine, but part of her still wanted to avoid the older ones. They were bigger and stronger, although Twitch knew cats like Moosebloom meant no harm.

"Did you catch that?" Alderwing asked Lichen, gesturing at the vole the siblings were eating.

Lichen nodded happily, and the calico she-cat looked impressed. Creekstorm gave her kit a nod of approval. Twitch was happy for her companion; as great as winning had been, she was just glad that the spotlight had shifted away from her.

Clayrain flicked his tail. "Well done, young one. But I have to say that that's against the warrior code." Twitch stared up at the warrior as he looked down at them with clouded blue eyes. "Elders, queens,

sick or injured cats and kits must be fed before apprentices and warriors. You may not feel it now, but there is hardly enough prey for everyone in leaf-bare."

Did we break a rule? Twitch stared at the ground. She hadn't eaten any vole, but maybe she was still in trouble.

"They're not apprentices yet," Creekstorm reminded him with an irritable flick of her tail.

Eevee jumped up, violet eyes shimmering. "When will we be?" His paws kneaded the ground, leaving claw marks indented in the dirt.

Alderwing gazed down at the young cats. At least, Twitch *thought* it was Alderwing. Her sister Flashflood looked almost identical... *but Flashflood is busy training with the defenders.* "Soon. Try to learn everything you can for now, before you have responsibilities."

"We'll do our best!" Splash answered the calico eagerly. Lichen nodded, determination twinkling in her leaf-green eyes.

Clayrain huffed a wry laugh, his eyes softening for the first time. He nodded towards the young cats and led the patrol back to the Great Tree.

Moosebloom mewed a goodbye to Creekstorm before wrapping her tail over her legs neatly, beginning to groom herself. Meanwhile, Twitch pondered what Alderwing had said. "What does she mean, learn all we can?" she whispered to Eevee. "What is there to learn?"

Eevee blinked at her with a *mrrow* of amusement. "Hunting and fighting of course! Haven't you heard from the other cats? You just wait—we're going to be the best warriors ever! Right?" His white-tipped tail flicked with excitement. "All the other cats will fear me and my pranks."

His voice had faded into the background of Twitch's mind. A fuzzy sound had started in her ears. Her heartbeat quickened, and she took an involuntary step backward. *No. It can't be.* "Fighting?" she choked out, well aware that her voice sounded strained.

"We've been learning lots," agreed Moosebloom. The spotted she-cat

raised her tail as if enjoying the attention. "It's hard, but I guess learning to be warriors is important now that we're living among rival Clans. Oh, but not to say it isn't fun! Though training with Alderwing bores me to death sometimes..."

Twitch was dimly aware of the continued chatter, but she also realised that her claws had slid into the ground, her ears flat against her head. The image of her manically cackling as she towered over a young kit flashed in her mind, stealing her breath. *No,* she thought again desperately. *No way!*

Warrior. Fight. Rivals. Words swarmed in her head as if taunting her like a pair of horribly humoured eyes.

"Are you okay?" Splash's voice broke into her thoughts. The grey she-cat opened her eyes, gasping for breath. She realised that Lichen was frowning at her and Eevee looked confused.

"What's wrong, Twitch?" Eevee mewed.

Twitch shook her head. There was no *way she* could tell anyone, not even her best friend. "It's...nothing," she mumbled, avoiding Splash's worried gaze. "I guess I'll just go up to camp now." The words sounded awkward, but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

Eevee pressed his brown pelt against hers comfortingly. "Right, me too."

"We'd better bring this back for Trickle." Splash picked up the half-eaten vole by his paws and glanced at Lichen. The ginger-and-brown she-cat shrugged and followed them back up the Great Tree. "See you, Moosebloom," she called, who responded with a mew. Twitch lowered her head guiltily. Wasn't everybody having fun before?

"Sorry," she murmured to Eevee once they were in the treetops.

He twisted his head to look at her. "No need to apologise. Not like you soaked our fur in honey or something." He caught himself with a purr. "What a great idea for a prank."

Twitch shuffled her paws self-consciously. "I don't want to learn to

fight," she admitted.

Eevee stared at her incredulously. "You don't want other cats to fear you?"

"*Of course* not." Twitch shook her head, flicked her tail over Eevee's lightheartedly. "Not everyone is made to be a master pranker like you, you know."

"Ah, you innocent soul," Eevee purred. "I get it. You're too nice for this—in a good way of course! Would you rather be a defender?" Twitch's gaze flicked to Trailblaze, who was chasing down a leaf with great intensity. Crowpelt and Laurelcall were busy making nests out of twigs, while Eggnogshine stared at a group of warriors who were sharing prey, his eyes fixed on Sparrowberry. From what Clayrain had told them, defenders focused more on guarding and upkeeping the camp rather than hunting or fierce battle training. *But they still have to protect the camp from intruders.*

"Or a medicine cat?" Her friend nodded towards the ash tree, where Skylark and Avalanchefall were sitting with their pelts touching. Twitch shrugged. Skylark was never *mean* to anyone, but she didn't exactly seem friendly either. "I don't know," she sighed. "I guess I'd rather train with you."

"Aww." Eevee bumped her lightly with his shoulder. "Me too."

But what if Twitch's warrior mentor forced her to fight, or got mad at her if she didn't train? The thought made her want to slip beneath a tree and stay there for moons.

"You don't have to decide now!" Eevee quickly assured her. "You can be a bush for all I care and we would still be best friends."He ended it with a light purr, but he said it so confidently that Twitch genuinely felt her mind clearing. "Thanks. I just hope Sparkshadow gives me someone nice as a mentor."

"Yeah." Eevee tilted his head thoughtfully. "I want someone great at warrior skills. Like Puddlesoar or Chasecloud or oh, Sparkstar himself!" His tail swung back and forth as it dangled from the branch. "How cool would having a leader as your mentor be?"

Twitch's eyes slid toward Sparkstar nearby, talking with Clayrain. The two cats looked like they were getting along, thankfully. Twitch was just relieved it was a friendly Clan that introduced them to the forest and was training most of the older cats. "He's over there," she noted.

Eevee scrambled to his paws. "I'll go and make friends with him and maybe he'll take me as an apprentice!"

Twitch wondered how on earth her friend had no problem just walking up to the Clan leader like that, but knowing Eevee, she shouldn't have been surprised. His gaze was already darting to where the leader was sitting.

"Alright. Good luck," she mewed lightheartedly.

Eevee purred and touched his nose to hers. "Seeya later, Twitch!" His violet gaze softened. "Don't worry, I'll make sure to ask for a nice mentor for you too." Before she knew it, the brown tom had scampered away and made a beeline toward the leader.

Why did you bring us here? Twitch wanted to yowl at Sparkstar. *Why couldn't we live somewhere nice and peaceful? Where cats don't actively train to hurt each other?*

Maybe it was fate. Or the star's will, or something...maybe she had been too hopeful. Twitch sighed, mentally steeling herself, because she knew this was coming eventually.

Chapter 3

"Hurry up, Avalanchefall!" Skylark hopped from paw to paw on the branches of the ash tree, feeling as excited as a kit having their first taste of real prey. She gazed into the darkening sky, waiting to slowly be lit with stars. *The spirits of our ancestors.* Anticipation prickled along her pelt. *Ancestors that I'm going to share tongues with!*

"Don't be an impatient mouse-brain!" her mentor called back, stretching in his nest. "It's not even moonhigh yet."

"We have to get there *before* moonhigh, right?" Skylark retorted.

"A couple more moments," Avalanchefall mumbled sleepily. "Maybe you can check on Eggnogshine in the meantime." The cream defender had complained of soreness during battle training the day before.

"Great WishClan, are all SnowyClan cats like this?" Skylark gave herself a quick grooming before climbing out of the medicine tree. Despite her impatience, Skylark admitted to herself that life was much better with the other medicine cat there. *Even if I've eaten more berries in the past few days than in my whole life.*

She strode over the branches of the Great Tree. Sparkstar had announced it would be their main camp, because of its sturdy branches that represented their Clan taking root in the forest. She kind of liked that—but lately she had been wondering if she was more like a cloud drifting overhead.

Vixenpool stood in a nook beside the Tallbranch, taking the place of Swampwhisker who had been organising patrols the past few mornings. Miloheart was by her side, his brown pelt more well-groomed than it was the past moon of travelling. "Hey Alderwing!" the deputy meowed brightly to the calico she-cat. "How about you lead dusk patrol?"

"*I'm Flashflood,*" the defender reminded the deputy with a slightly

annoyed tinge to her voice.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Vixenpool dipped her head apologetically to the she-cat.

"I can still go on patrol," the real Alderwing offered, shifting closer to her sister. "We can go together...if you can manage everything on your own, of course."

Skylark was puzzled; why would Alderwing need to help Vixenpool at her job?

"I'll manage." Vixenpool smiled down at her friend.

Miloheart nudged her. "Vix, why don't you let the young ones go too?" He flicked an ear at Lichen, Splash, and Trickle. The ginger deputy blinked, gazing at the apprentices with soft hazel eyes. "Oh, I'm not sure I can do that. Sparkstar hasn't given them mentors yet."

The elder narrowed his eyes. "And that means they can't stretch their legs a bit on the grass for a change? Great WishClan!"

The elder's words didn't surprise Skylark as much as the fact he had mentioned WishClan. *She* definitely believed in her warrior ancestors, and she knew from Avalanchefall that the other medicine cats did, but most RobinClan cats still frowned or rolled their eyes when they were mentioned. Even now the patched medicine cat could hear a disbelieving snort coming from Chasecloud. A moment later, the tortoiseshell queen stepped up to join Alderwing and Flashflood. "I'll join the patrol. My legs need a good stretch! Crowpelt? You coming?"

The dark-furred defender snapped his head up from the mossy nest he was arranging. Stretching, he gave a long groan as he got to his paws. "Could take a break," he yawned as he padded up to her. "But I thought you'd want Kiteheart to come."

"I asked, but leave it to him to sort fresh-kill like a farmer instead." Chasecloud's electric blue eyes flashed with adoration as she spoke about her mate. "Wouldn't want to disturb him! Come on, let's see how fast you can get to the ground." At that, Crowpelt's eyes lit up,

and soon the patrol was leaping towards the ground. Chasecloud went a little slower, reminding Skylark that the she-cat was expecting kits after all.

Skylark headed towards the defenders' tree, a sturdy acacia with branches spreading out all over the place like shooting stars. *Where's Eggnogshine?* Her eyes scanned the branches before catching sight of the pale yellow tom.

"Oh hey, Skylark!" Laurelcall greeted her, widening his amber eyes as she crossed the branches. Skylark flicked her tail uncomfortably. *Does he have to make it so painfully obvious that he's trying to include everyone all the time?* She glanced down at Eggnogshine, scanning his yellow fur for injuries. "Are you...still sore? I have some dock here."

The defender nodded vigorously. "That sounds good." He looked down at his fluffy body, wincing as he stretched out his muscles. "I don't think I'm built for all this exercise!"

Trailblaze gave a *mrrow* of amusement while Eggnogshine stared at him, bewildered. "Kittypets wouldn't be," the ginger-and-white tom teased.

"Careful, Trail, there are a *lot* of former kittypets in this Clan." Laurelcall rubbed his cheek to Eggnogshine's briefly, a twinkle in his amber eyes. "And you can hardly make fun of them when you've barely made progress on the nestwork at all!"

Trailblaze suddenly fell silent, fidgeting with his paws. "Sorry," he mewed. "I tried, but I...got distracted." The defender gazed out into the forest almost longingly. "I think I might want to switch to being a warrior instead. I wanted to talk to Sparkstar about it." He glanced apologetically at Laurelcall.

Surprise flashed in the white tom's eyes. "Huh...?"

Trailblaze gestured wildly at his messily strung-together nest with twigs hanging lazily rather than neatly tucked in. Laurelcall purred with amusement. "Whatever you like, you bird-brain," he murmured. "I'll let Crowpelt know. But remember to still hang out

with us!"

"Obviously!" Trailblaze flicked his tail indignantly and stood up. As he disappeared towards the leader's tree, Skylark wondered why Laurelcall or Crowpelt would care so much.

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The air was cool and clear, the sky crossed with amber and pink streaks highlighted by fluffy clouds. The soft wind that hit Skylark's fur felt magical, as if it carried stars in its stream of air. The stone cave that sat at the edge of a pool of water crested over their heads. Water rushed down from the top, covering the entrance of the cave. Trees surrounded the small clearing, making it feel safe and secret.

"Pretty, right?" Avalanchefall whispered, his words nearly drowned out by the rush of water.

Skylark kept close to Avalanchefall as he padded towards the waterfall. "Of course!" The excitement that had coursed through her veins only increased as they drew nearer.

Then she saw other cats there and froze.

"About time, Avalanchefall." The voice came from a dark grey MarshClan tom whose fur was matted with mud. Skylark stayed close to Avalanchefall, holding her breath. In her excitement, she had forgotten that there would be other medicine cats.

"Nice to see you too, Scruffyheart." Avalanchefall smiled. "Hurricanepaw! How have you been?"

The yellow she-cat beamed. "Great!" She glanced behind the SnowyClan medicine cat, stormy grey eyes widening. "Do you have someone with you? An apprentice?" Her expression was filled with hope and excitement. Looking around the Starspray, Skylark saw a calico she-cat, but no other young cats around. *Hurricanepaw must be the only medicine cat apprentice.*

"This is Skylark of RobinClan." Avalanchefall's familiar relaxed voice swept over her. "I've been teaching her the ways of a medicine cat for a half-moon, and now she's here to get her full name."

The calico finally spoke. "Are you sure a half-moon is enough?" She slipped over to Skylark, golden eyes inquisitive. Her fur appeared slightly ruffled, as if she had just woken up. Skylark blinked uncertainly. *She must be the CavernClan medicine cat.*

Avalanchefall shrugged. "Suppose so."

"Welcome, Skylark." Scruffyheart gave her a warm yet slightly reserved smile. "We're glad to have you." Skylark wondered if the dark grey warrior meant it. Then Hurricanepaw kneaded her paws in the ground. "Being a medicine cat is the absolute best!!"

Skylark smiled at the enthusiastic she-cat. *What am I doing, treating these cats like enemies? We're all medicine cats!* "I know!" She turned to the calico, who was sitting in the most dignified way she had ever seen another cat sit.

"Juniperivy," the CavernClan cat said at last. "I hope your training has been going well." She shot a narrowed look at Avalanchefall, who grinned widely back at her.

"It has," Skylark answered. "It's been the most fun thing I've done in my life!"

To her surprise, Juniperivy *mrrow*ed with amusement. "I'm glad you think so." She stood up, padding to the water's edge. "We should get started, don't you think?"

Even the water is sparkling, she noticed. *How much more magical than this place get?* Hurricanepaw dashed into the water, frolicking about, followed by her mentor. Skylark paused, hesitant to get in.

"Don't like swimming?" Juniperivy guessed. Skylark shook her head. Living on the streets in Twolegplace, she had never learned to swim before. Though, this water did seem a billion times more sparkly and attractive than any water she had ever seen before—like the night sky reflected on the ground.

Stop obsessing over the water!

"Me neither," Juniperivy continued, "but you get used to it. Especially with these shrew-brains around." She glanced fondly at

Avalanchefall, Scruffyheart and Hurricanepaw splashing in the Starspray before paddling over to stand under the waterfall. Avalanchefall gave her a *what-are-you-waiting-for?* look.

Juniperivy stepped into the water and Skylark hurried to follow. Cold shivers went up her fur, but she padded on. *I'm going to see WishClan.* She reached the waterfall and stood beside Avalanchefall, feeling the weight of the water as it sprayed her pelt.

The rush of the waterfall changed into music humming in her ears as she stood in the pond. Sparks swam behind her closed eyes and a bright glow suddenly erupted from somewhere, encasing her soul in what seemed to be a white shining star. She could no longer sense the wetness of the pond or the weight of the water on her back.

When nothing else happened, Skylark opened her eyes and her breath was taken instantly.

It was *beyond* beautiful. WishClan hunting grounds were so immensely amazing; there was nothing Skylark could compare with it. The sky was a warm red-to-golden gradient, like the colour of the trees in leaf-fall. The grass beneath her paws was so soft; and to her surprise, a cool turquoise colour. So were the leaves in the lush trees scattered around the wide stretch of forest. Fireflies, like the ones at the Starspray, floated around the forested land, spilling warm light over the stone dens that stood in front of Skylark. Cats were everywhere—their pelts gleamed with flickering lights like shooting stars, and each spirit had a different tint of light emitting from their sleek, glossy fur. Majestic wings even sprouted from their shoulders. The air smelled clean and fresh, highlighted by the faint scent of forest prey.

So this is why they call it WishClan, Skylark thought. *This place is like a dream come true.*

"Oakstar-?" Skylark gasped as she glimpsed the brown tabby padding toward them with bright eyes. He looked young and strong, and his speckled pelt emitted a soft yellow glow. Oakstar bowed at Skylark, his eyes shimmering as he spread his golden wings. "Hello, Skylark. You've come a long way, and I know your Clan is proud of you. It's time to give you your medicine cat name."

"But...I just saw you a half-moon ago!" Skylark argued, refusing to believe her eyes.

"I got run over by a Twoleg monster when I was trying to save one of our kits who strayed too far out of camp. Redkit got out of the way in time, but I didn't."Oakstar's eyes lowered. "I thought word would have spread, but I guess Clayrain hasn't told anyone yet. I mean—Claystar," he quickly corrected. A moment passed and, before either Skylark or her leader could ask anything more, he had changed the subject. "Enough of that! It is time for the ceremony."

With a flick of his tail, Oakstar gathered all the spirit cats' attention. All the Clan ancestors' eyes were on Skylark now. A thrill of amazement ran through Skylark's fur—she couldn't believe it! WishClan was actually here looking at her! They all raised their heads, cheering her name, as Skylark felt amazement sparkle through her.

"Skylark?" Oakstar whispered as the other spirit cats padded away. "How—how is Sparkstar, is he doing okay? Tell him I've been watching over him—all of you. RobinClan is going to be okay."

"He's okay, and thank you." Skylark felt inspired by the fact that WishClan was going to help her along the way.

"As a medicine cat, you will have to learn about Darkspirits." Oakstar's smile faded slightly. *Darkspirits?* Why did it sound so ominous? "Darkspirits are cats who died, but have too many unresolved negative emotions to find peace in WishClan. Things like hate, jealousy, or anger can stop a spirit from entering our territory. Their ghosts are left to wander the earth until they can put the past behind them. So part of a medicine cat's job is to talk to them and help them hopefully be reunited back with their kin in WishClan."

Skylark's eyes widened; there was more to the afterlife than she had realised. But one part stuck out to her: "*Talk* to them?"

"Yes. You may approach them in dreams, or they might approach you." The brown tabby's eyes were pools of emotion. "Some of our kin and friends are out there, and we'd do anything to see them

again."

"I'll try," Skylark promised. She could do it, couldn't she? It would be another fascinating part of her job. "I promise."

Then the warm, sunset-like territory gently faded from view, the soft turquoise grass turning to wet stone beneath her paws. With a start, Skylark opened her eyes and found herself where right she had been, under the pounding waterfall again.

All the other medicine cats were waking up as well, stretching and shaking out their fur as they padded to shore. As Skylark went to join them, she caught sight of a shadow of a cat slipping through the stone cave. Was that a Darkspirit? Her heart pounded excitedly in her chest. This was another thing that warriors and defenders would never be able to be part of, and another reason to be excited about being a medicine cat.

I'm coming. I'm going to help you, I promise.

Chapter 4

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather at the Great Tree for a Clan meeting!"

Twitch fidgeted with her paws as she and Splash made their way to the oak in the middle of the camp. She searched the camp with her eyes for Eevee. Trickle had still been asleep in his nest when she had woken up in the birch tree where they slept, but Lichen and Eevee had mysteriously vanished.

"Excited for the ceremony, Twitch?" Splash purred as he jumped to a higher branch, shaking dead leaves to the ground. "I talked to Skylark yesterday night—she said I could be her apprentice!"

Twitch blinked in surprise. "I didn't know you wanted to be a medicine cat."

"I kind of decided when I heard about her half-moon meeting," Splash explained, his ice-blue eyes sparkling. "You get to meet cats from other Clans, Twitch. I can't wait!"

Twitch forced a smile. She was glad for her friend, but the pit of worry in her stomach was only growing bigger as the ceremony approached. "I hope I don't get Mistleswoop or Kestrelflame as my mentor." The mere thought of either of the fierce she-cats made her shiver. Mistleswoop had even been from a *rogue group*, for stars sake. Who was to say she wouldn't claw Twitch's face off if she did something wrong?

Splash gave her a sympathetic look. "Mistleswoop isn't that bad—and her mate Puddlesoar is really smart. He tells the *best* stories. Maybe you'll get him?"

"I guess..." Twitch followed him to the front of the gathered cats, settling right below Tallbranch. The camp felt emptier now that the other Clan cats were gone, and Twitch sighed a sigh of relief. It was so relieving to not have rival warriors—or whatever—in their group

anymore. Not that she understood why they were even rivals. The MarshClan and CavernClan cats had seemed just fine, and Avalanchefall was nice too as far as she could tell. Maybe she was just being overdramatic about the whole 'warrior' thing. *It could be just a title they give themselves,* she reasoned. *Doesn't mean they go into bloody battles or anything.*

"Good morning, Splash," Alderwing meowed at the young tom. "Hi, Twitch. Have any of you seen Eevee?"

Before Twitch could respond, Trickle came into view. His ginger fur was sticky and matted, dripping with sweet golden honey. Eevee and Lichen followed, giggling suspiciously. Twitch shook her head with amusement as Eevee padded to her side. *I shouldn't be surprised.*

"That's what you needed the honey for?" Splash frowned at Lichen. "I thought you had a sore throat or something!"

Alderwing narrowed her eyes, a worried glint flashing in her pale green gaze. Flashflood gave Trickle a strange look from where she sat beside her littermate, but quickly looked away when the stocky tom growled a high-pitched growl back.

Sparkstar raised his tail to start the meeting. "First of all, we are officially a Clan now," he mewed as cheers started. "Skylark, now a trained medicine cat, has gone to her first half-moon meeting yesterday." Twitch glanced over at the white-and-brown she-cat, who was staring at the ground, looking embarrassed. *I wonder what it'll be like for her now that Avalanchefall is gone.* The two cats had seemed rather close...Twitch felt a pang at the thought of being separated from Eevee like that one day.

"What was it like?" Moosebloom called out from where she was seated beside Creekstorm. "Was WishClan really there?"

"Of course not," Puddlesoar whispered to Stormfall. Twitch had to agree with him. She had seen many dead animals by now, and once they died, they all lay there limply waiting to be eaten. But Stormfall shook his head. "I know we haven't heard of such things before, but I want to believe it's real."

Sparkstar shared a look with Skylark before continuing. "Anyway, that is not the main thing I wanted to discuss. It is time to finally give five young cats their mentors!" Sparkstar looked directly at where Twitch's and the others were sitting and she cringed as their piercing gazes laid on her. "Come forward now."

"What—now?" Creekstorm looked up at the leader with shocked eyes. She started licking at Tricklepaw's sticky fur furiously while the tom squirmed away. Moosebloom nudged her friend. "Just let him go," she advised. "I'm not sure you can exactly make him look presentable now, you know?"

Creekstorm reluctantly allowed the ginger tom pranced away to catch up with his siblings.

Twitch stayed close to Eevee, who was bouncing around happily. "I hope Sparkstar's my mentor! Do you think he likes me enough? Oh, I hope so!"

Twitch's tail flicked anxiously behind her, thoughts swirling inside her mind. *Please don't give me someone scary.* She closed her eyes, desperately wanting to turn invisible. In front of her Splash and Lichen were whispering excitedly, and it made her feel worse. What if her new mentor didn't like her? What if they forced her to fight? *WishClan, please!* Twitch desperately found herself praying to the afterlife she didn't even believe in.

Sparkstar looked down at the apprentices from the Tallbranch. "Tricklepaw, your mentor will be Kestrelflame." At the sound of the warrior's name, the young ginger tom's jaws gaped open in a wide smile. The pale ginger she-cat stepped up to him and bent down to touch her muzzle to his. She looked as if she was analysing Tricklepaw from the inside out with burning amber eyes. Twitch felt relief swamp her chest that Kestrelflame wouldn't be *her* mentor.

"Lichenpaw, you have chosen the path of a defender. Your mentor will be Eggnogshine." The golden tom looked unnerved at the sound of his name, but he padded out of the crowd and towards the dark ginger tabby apprentice, touching his nose to hers. Lichenpaw licked his shoulder respectfully. "Yeah, go Eggnogshine!" Eevee

cheered. He was now fidgeting with anticipation.

"Splashpaw, you asked to be a medicine cat," Sparkstar continued. "I honour your wish, and trust that Skylark will teach you everything she knows." As the RobinClan medicine cat touched her nose to Splashpaw's, her eyes were narrowedwith emotion that Twitch couldn't work out. But Splashpaw's intelligent ice-blue eyes sparkled as he gazed up at his new mentor. Twitch saw Lichenpaw stare in shock at her brother in surprise from the corner of her eye. *I guess he didn't tell her...but maybe if she didn't run off with Eeveepaw!*

"Eeveepaw." Sparkstar's smile was fond as he said her friend's new name. Twitch found herself hoping for Eeveepaw's sake that his mentor would be Sparkstar, or someone else he wanted. Eeveepaw had gone still, his eyes glazed over with hope. "Your mentor will be Alderwing."

Eeveepaw's eyes grew wide and his head drew back in disbelief. "Aww..." he blurted out. Alderwing ducked her head uncertainly, glancing back at Flashflood as she went up to Eeveepaw. Twitch hoped the tortoiseshell warrior hadn't heard her friend's exclamation. The two touched noses, and Eeveepaw reluctantly licked her shoulder.

"And finally, Twitchpaw." Sparkstar's olive gaze landed on her pelt and Twitchpaw felt her heart pounding all through her body. "Your mentor will be..." Time seemed to slow down and speed up as her breath froze in her chest. "Trailblaze."

Twitchpaw nearly collapsed with relief. She barely noticed as the former defender came over to touch his muzzle to hers, swept up in the airy state of her mind. Trailblaze had been a loner, not a rogue, and he didn't seem mean or forceful. "I'm honoured to be your mentor!"

"Tricklepaw! Splashpaw! Lichenpaw! Eeveepaw! Twitchpaw!" Yowls of congratulations rose around them, especially coming from Squishypelt and Creekstorm. It then hit Twitchpaw that it was official, she had a mentor now. She was going to start training to become a warrior, to hunt and patrol, and—a shiver ran down her spine—fight.

What did I sign up for?

She met Trailblaze's bright amber gaze. "So, I guess we should start training!" Her new mentor jumped to his paws. "So, what do you want to do? Sparkstar says we can go explore the territory, or hunt or train or..." He trailed off, then blinked apologetically at her. "Maybe showing you the territory would be a good idea."

"O–okay," Twitchpaw murmured. "Is Eevee...paw going to come with us?"

Alderwing nodded, flicking her tail as a gesture to her new apprentice. "It would be good for you both to see the territory."

Before they left the Great Tree, Lichenpaw's voice came to her ears. "So...you're a medicine cat now?" she mewed to Splashpaw. "That's great! I bet you'll get to learn so many useful things. Are we going to see the territory together too?"

Skylark's surprisingly rough voice answered her. "I was thinking of showing Splashpaw the best places to find herbs. Eggnogshine will probably want to...not do that." Her meow was slightly awkward. Lichenpaw deflated a bit, but Splashpaw's blue eyes lit up as he followed Skylark eagerly. Twitchpaw couldn't help feeling bad for the other apprentice—she was training alongside Eeveepaw, but Lichenpaw was now walked a separate path from her brother. Twitchpaw turned away and sped up to catch up with her Clanmates.

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Trailblaze sped from location to location as he showed her everything. Twitchpaw struggled to keep up; hiding was her strong suit, and she had never been the fastest runner. *I guess he's fast because he and his friends used to be loners.* But it wasn't just his paws that seemed to be racing, as her mentor seemed to be throwing information her way at breakneck speed.

"This is where we soak moss for our water supply in camp!" Before Twitchpaw could process the sponges of moss and plants smelling like the medicine tree growing around the grass, Trailblaze had

moved on to point his muzzle at where the forest melted into a rocky gorge. "And that's MarshClan territory! Very swampy, isn't it? I wonder what prey they have. Can't be squirrels or birds like us, so maybe..." He swung to face her. "Twitchpaw, what's your favourite prey?"

Twitchpaw blinked at the sudden question. "Uh...well...sparrows?"

The ginger and white tom nodded enthusiastically, seeming undeterred. "Oh, that's Laurel's favourite too! Who, by the way, *totally* has a thing for—"

"Okay, that's enough," Alderwing interrupted, a slight smirk curling her muzzle. "Take a good look and sniff at the border, apprentices."

Beyond the scent border was a marshland with little islands of trees and tall grass. Ferns and rocks covered most of the wet mud that looked a lot like a lake. In the distance, Twitchpaw could see silhouettes of cats walking along the reeds. She took a deep breath, letting the already familiar scent of MarshClan wash over her.

Eeveepaw sniffed at the border curiously. "Can we go say hi?"

Alderwing shook her head, green eyes sparking with trepidation. "The warrior code says that we cannot hunt or trespass on another Clan's territory. Maybe don't go too close to the border Eeveepaw." The brown apprentice frowned but took a step back.

What if we accidentally step over the border? The thought flashed in Twitchpaw's mind. *Does that count as trespassing?* The last thing she wanted was to accidentally get her Clan chased out of the forest, so she decided to be very careful while going near the border. Or maybe stay away from it altogether.

"Our border patrol has already marked the border this morning," Trailblaze mewed. "Don't worry, both of you will get to go on border patrols too!"

Okay, maybe her staying-away-from-the-border plan wasn't going to work after all.

Eeveepaw smiled determinedly. "Twitchpaw and I will mark the

border so well that no cat would dare step across!"

They trekked through the rest of the territory, Trailblaze leading the way. Twitchpaw found herself admiring the way her mentor seemed so unafraid of anything, even when they padded past Badgerplace.

"Do you think the badgers will come near our camp?" she whispered to Eeveepaw.

Eeveepaw shrugged. "If they do, the warriors can take care of it! Clayrain taught them *all kinds* of battle moves."

Twitchpaw didn't know if that made things better or worse. Maybe her stay-away-from-borders plan was back on again.

As they progressed, there was a flowing stream passing through the territory, peppered with stones and flat rocky hills. Evergreen trees lined the mossy area. Twitchpaw breathed in, recognizing the scent that had radiated from Avalanchefall's pelt.

"SnowyClan cats thrive in leaf-bare, with their long coats and plentiful snowshoe hares to eat," Alderwing explained with a twitch of her ears. "And because of their long coats, their greenleaf is like our leaf-bare."

Twitchpaw looked up at the calico warrior in surprise; she hadn't known there were cats like that. Eeveepaw glanced at Twitchpaw with a wide-eyed look. "Oh! Like Avalanchefall!" He swished his bushy tail happily. "Isn't that cool, Twitchpaw? That's like the opposite of us!"

"It is!" Twitchpaw strained her ears to see if she could hear anything from the territory. Only rushing water filled her ears, but she did see some cat-like figures moving around. *I wonder if any of them are Avalanchefall!*

"If you keep walking toward their territory, you'll pass CavernClan and arrive at the Starspray." Alderwing added, pausing at the last word. "That's supposedly where Sparkstar got his one wish." Then she lifted her head to peer at the late sunhigh sky. "But we should get back to camp now. I'm sure you're tired, and we've shown you

every part of our territory anyway."

Twitchpaw's heart lifted a little with relief. She *was* pretty tired after all that running around the territory. Next to hiding spots, she felt safest in the trees—no other Clan cats, no badgers. Trailblaze padded beside her, a freshly killed squirrel dangling from his jaws. "Thought I might do some hunting on the way," he explained cheerfully. "Sparrowberry taught me how to catch squirrels. I can teach you too!"

Eeveepaw jumped up excitedly. "Can we try *now*??" He dropped into a hunting crouch and leaped, but his paws were clumsy and he ended up skidding on the ground. A squirrel ran by his fur, causing Eeveepaw to jump up in surprise with a yowl and race back to Trailblaze and Twitchpaw.

Twitchpaw couldn't help purring. "Prey isn't supposed to be the one chasing *you*," she whispered as he returned to her side. Eeveepaw laughed, but his eyes quickly focused sharply again on nearby bushes. "Let me try again!"

Alderwing stopped him with a light touch of her tail. "I'll teach you to hunt when we have time, Eeveepaw."

The brown tom's expression turned frustrated and he turned to Twitchpaw's mentor with pleading eyes, but Trailblaze stood up again. "Alderwing is right. Come on then, let's get back to camp! Wait till everyone sees how much you two have learned." He smiled warmly at Twitchpaw, which she hesitantly returned. She was glad that the first training session had been easy enough...but now she knew there were *badgers* and *borders* and *patrols*.

She glanced at Eeveepaw, wondering what he thought. But his tail was hanging and he was looking at his paws. "We'll get lots more chances to hunt," Twitchpaw assured him.

Eeveepaw looked up with disappointment in his violet eyes. "It's not that, it's that I have the most *boring* mentor in the world!" He flicked his ears back with a sigh. "I wish I got Trailblaze or Chasecloud or...even her sister Flashflood! But of course, Sparkstar gives me someone boring."

Twitchpaw brushed her pelt against his. She knew her friend had dreamt of being a respected warrior from the time that Clayrain and Oakstar had introduced warrior life to them.

"You'll become a great warrior either way," Twitchpaw promised. *Although I'm not sure about me.*

Chapter 5

Okay... so that happened.

Skylark glanced at the curious young apprentice by her side, unsure what to think. She hadn't expected Splashpaw to approach her late the previous night to ask her about the half-moon meeting. But honestly, she had been too wrapped in thinking about Darkspirits to register when she agreed to mentor him. Now it was finally setting in that she was going to have to train Splashpaw like Avalanchefall had for her.

She watched as Squishypelt nuzzled each of his kits, squeezing his tail around them. Several cats congratulated the new apprentices too, wishing them good luck on their apprenticeship as they padded back to the warriors' chestnut tree or reported to Vixenpool for patrol.

Oh, WishClan, she thought ruefully as Twitchpaw and Eeveepaw left with their mentors. *What in the stars did I sign up for?*

Kestrelflame grunted from a branch nearby. "I'll take Tricklepaw around the territory too. I want him to be the toughest apprentice ever."

Tricklepaw gasped and jumped up, nodding his head profusely. "I want to learn to be tough, Kestrelflame!" he squeaked.

His mentor nodded gruffly. "Clean up a bit first. Being a drowned rat is not tough." She gestured at his scruffy fur, still dripping with honey. Skylark wondered what on earth had happened to the apprentice. Lichenpaw cast a rueful look at Splashpaw, but Splashpaw didn't seem to take notice as he gazed up at Skylark hopefully. Eventually, his sister looked away as Eggnogshine nosed at his apprentice towards the defenders' acacia tree.

Skylark wished the tom beside her was Avalanchefall instead. She felt lost without her mentor, but this young RobinClan cat was

counting on her. And although she had never really gotten along with her Clanmates before, maybe this would be different. They already had something big in common, didn't they?

The white-and-brown she-cat decided to cut through the silence. "Let's go down to the stream."

***

"Was this many berries really necessary?" Splashpaw asked as they hauled their way back to the medicine tree.

Skylark placed her herbs down on a branch. "They're a good source of food when prey is low." Avalanchefall had explained that since berries grew in newleaf and greenleaf, SnowyClan ate them to stay cool.*Great WishClan, I wish he was here.* Although it had been a familiar session of collecting herbs, it felt strange that the fluffy white tom wasn't there to crack jokes or pad comfortingly beside her. Splashpaw was more talkative for sure.

I think that must have been the most I've ever talked to a Clanmate, she realised.

Deciding to test Splashpaw, Skylark pointed at the borage they had collected. "Do you know what this is?"

Her apprentice frowned in concentration. "Borage?"

Skylark nodded, surprised at how fast he was learning. "Good for fever and helping queens produce milk." She filed the leaves away briskly into a dip in the ash tree.

Her apprentice blinked up at her eagerly. "When are we going to meet the other medicine cats?"

Skylark supposed Splashpaw was as excited as her about sharing the mystery of their ancestors with other cats who understood. "At the Gathering, next full moon." Skylark carefully sorted the catnip from burdock root with her paws. She remembered how Avalanchefall had marvelled at how much of the herb they had in their territory. "Our cats don't often need catmint," he had explained with a shake of his fluffy coat as a demonstration. "But Great WishClan, no-cat's-

land sure is *filled* with it!" Skylark purred gently at the memory before realising that she had been tuning Splashpaw out.

"And I'll get to see WishClan too?" the tortoiseshell apprentice repeated, his blue gaze shining. "I can't *wait* to tell Lichenpaw and Tricklepaw ALL about it. They'll have to believe they're real!"

Skylark shook her head. *Do all apprentices ask so many questions?* "Medicine cats walk a very different life from defenders and warriors." She registered the confusion that flickered across Splashpaw's face and wondered if he somehow didn't know that before. "Our special connection with WishClan helps us aid Sparkstar in making decisions for the Clan, but it's also something that...can't really be shared with anyone else."

Their conversation was interrupted by the rustle of leaves could be heard as Vixenpool came leaping into the ash tree. The deputy's hazel eyes were wide and her darker fur prickled along her back. "Thank goodness you're back. Come quick!" she gasped.

Skylark was about to ask why, but was promptly cut off by an ear-piercing screech from the willow tree a little farther from theirs. *Chasecloud must be kitting!* She froze at the realisation, her heart quickening in her chest. Avalanchefall had gone over how to help a kitting queen, but only briefly.

Splashpaw jumped up, eyes darkened with concern. "We need to help! What herbs do we need?"

Skylark blinked and tried to focus. "Chervil...I think...raspberry leaves...and was it parsley or borage for milk production?" She sniffed out the herbs, her paws clumsy and uncoordinated as she pulled them out of the dips in the trunk.

"Borage!" Splashpaw exclaimed proudly. "We were just talking about it!"

Vixenpool dipped her head to the medicine cats, relaxing slightly. "I'll go tell Chasecloud you're coming soon. Poor cat, kitting sounds as painful as getting attacked by rogues." The deputy rushed off, her lithe white paws skimming lightly across the wood.

Skylark wrapped the herbs in a quick leaf wrap as Splashpaw watched with wide eyes. "We should go—"

Hang on! I'm trying to get ready! Skylark held back an impatient growl as she hastily secured the leaf wrap. The medicine cats raced towards the nursery, being led by the sounds of the queen's yowls.

Kiteheart was crouching beside his mate, his soft brown tail laid over her cringing form. Vixenpool paced around the sturdy branches of the willow as Skylark padded forward uncertainly.

"So um," Skylark meowed, unwrapping her wrap. "Eat these juniper berries; they should help ease the pain."

The queen lapped one up, her face twisting with agony. Kiteheart entangled her quivering tail with his, so close that the two cats almost blurred into one figure. "I wish I could be back at the barn..." Chasecloud whispered. The brown tom nodded, staring at her with such adoration that Skylark found it hard to watch. "I know. I'm sorry we aren't, love."

Chasecloud cringed, gasping hard for breath. *Is this normal?* Skylark wondered as she flipped through her herbs, trying to remember what would help. But Chasecloud had turned towards her impatiently. "What kind of a medicine cat are you?" she hissed. Her electric blue eyes flashed with pain and she gasped aloud. Kiteheart pressed his muzzle worriedly to her head.

Skylark stared back helplessly. *I don't know what to do!*

Just then, the air near her sparkled and shimmered. Skylark blinked as a ghostly figure of a cat, shining with a purple glow, smiling at her. A sense of peace suddenly washed over her brown and white pelt.

"Feel her belly," the winged silver cat meowed quietly. "Is it overly swollen?"

WishClan! Skylark exhaled. She hesitated for a moment, paws hanging over Chasecloud's fur, before lightly running her brown paws over her tortoiseshell fur. Luckily, it didn't feel overly

swollen.

The silver cat nodded satisfactorily. "Ask her to take deep breaths, then help her push. She'll be okay."

"Take deep breaths," Skylark told the queen. Splashpaw was by her side, pushing soaked moss over for the queen to lap at. She felt a tremor pass through the warrior and pressed on her belly with desperate hope that she was doing everything right.

With a slight whimper from the queen, the tension from her body was finally released. Skylark glanced towards the WishClan cat for instructions. The spirit nodded at Splashpaw. "He can lick the kit dry."

Skylark looked over at her apprentice, but his eyes were focused on Chasecloud and he didn't seem to see the spirit at all. "Lick the kit," she told him while giving a sideways gaze at the WishClan cat.

Splashpaw did as she asked. "It's a tom, I think."

Another shudder clutched the queen's body, but this time it seemed to come easier. Skylark took care of that one, following the spirit's instructions.

Chasecloud's shadowed eyes brightened with joy as she saw her kits. Kiteheart rested his muzzle on her head in silent happiness. The fluffy dappled grey tom-kit was finding his way toward his mom to suckle eagerly. His tiny ears were perked as he let out a high-pitched mew. His sister followed closely behind, her fur mostly white with brown around her face, tail tip and legs.

Splashpaw purred. "Congratulations, they're beautiful!"

Kiteheart nodded beside the queen in agreement as he licked his kits' soft fur. "Don't worry Chasecloud, soon you'll be beating me in races again," the brown defender joked.

"Soon," the tortoiseshell she-cat agreed, mischief flashing in her eyes. "Just like back on the farm. Our kits have inherited my genes." She purred with amusement as Kiteheart shook his head fondly at his mate.

Skylark started packing up the leftover herbs. *Cats can be weird sometimes.*

Suddenly Chasecloud cast her eyes on Skylark, radiating apology. "Sorry, Skylark," she murmured. "I shouldn't have said that about you..."

"It's okay," Skylark responded awkwardly. "Just doing my job." *Though I wouldn't have known what to do without WishClan's help.*

Once the queen had relaxed with the two kits nestled beside her, the white-and-brown she-cat slipped past her towards the WishClan cat. "Thank you," Skylark murmured. "What's your name?"

"Lynnxbranch." The glowing ghost smiled wispily back at her. Although her fur was translucent, her eyes were still as bright as in real life. She looked so much like a real cat despite her wings that Skylark couldn't help glancing around to check if any cat noticed her, but not even Splashpaw seemed to notice her existence.

As they crossed back to the Great Tree, Sparrowberry, the deaf she-cat, was sharing a squirrel with Vixenpool. "Hey, Skylark!" the deputy called when she passed by. Skylark turned, surprised. The ginger cat smiled, eyes darting between her and the nursery. "Are Chasecloud's kits born yet?"

"Her kits are here?!" Flashflood interrupted. She was reared up on her hind legs, reaching for the top of the warriors' den with twigs. "How are they? Does she need anything?"

Sparrowberry nudged Vixenpool and tilted her head sideways. The deputy immediately made some gestures with her tail, and the reddish-brown she-cat thumped her tail in response, looking toward the nursery eagerly.

Skylark felt a little overwhelmed. For a moment she wondered what it would be like to be Sparrowberry, having to rely on other cats just to understand what was going on. *Does she mind?*

Splashpaw jumped in when Skylark didn't respond, purring delightedly. "She has two kits," he announced. " You can visit if

Chasecloud is up to it."

"Thank WishClan!" Vixenpool sighed. "I was so worried."

Laurelcall dipped his head. "It's great that RobinClan has new members already." Skylark thought she saw Flashflood blink a quick look at him before turning away. Laurelcall didn't seem to notice as he patted some fresh moss into the warrior nests, accidentally getting some in Eggnogshine's fluffy cream fur in the meantime. "Oops, sorry pal," the white tom apologised as Eggnogshine shook out his fur.

Skylark headed for the medicine tree, leaving Splashpaw happily talking to the others. She was glad that the kits were okay, but she couldn't stop thinking about Lynxbranch. Was that what Oakstar meant by guiding her paws? A thrill of excitement ran through her.

I hope I'll start seeing Darkspirits soon, too!

***

Skylark could tell she was dreaming.

RobinClan camp was faded with an ominous glow. She could hardly hear the pawsteps of her Clanmates as they did their duties, or the chattering of apprentices, or the chirps of sparrows. Shadows shaped like cats crept around, pausing to take a curious look at Skylark.

Enthralled, the RobinClan medicine cat approached the one nearest to her. She noticed how she couldn't make out any of his features—they were dark and shifty. The cat-ghost tensed up at the sight of her as his tail swished from side to side apprehensively.

"Oh! Uh, hi," Skylark greeted him, unsure of what to do. It felt like she was underwater; her voice sounded weird in the strangely quiet place. "My name is Skylark, medicine cat of RobinClan."

The Darkspirit looked away. "I know," he meowed flatly. "I've been around your camp."

"Oh...okay. What's your name?" she tried. Maybe she should try to

jump straight into it. "How did you die?"

The Darkspirit's ears flicked back in irritation as he turned to face her. "All I know is I didn't die so some meddling cat would ask me a bunch of questions." He started to pad away. When his chilling fur brushed hers, a rush of flashes and noise entered her brain. *His memories.* But they cleared after a moment.

"Oh, WishClan," Skylark hissed at herself. "My first encounter with a Darkspirit and I already messed up."

Unexpectedly, the ghost cat stopped and turned back. Although Skylark couldn't make out his expression, he didn't seem as annoyed as before. A pause hung between them. "You'll be fine, kid," he muttered finally. "But there's a reason I'm not ready to go to WishClan yet, and if I'm right, it concerns your Clan too." And he vanished, along with the darkness around her.

Skylark blinked, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the almost too-bright light. Delight stirred in her chest as she sat up in her nest, breathing in the cool air of dawn. *I did it! I dreamed of a Darkspirit!*

But who *was* that ghost? What had stopped him from joining his ancestors in WishClan? Skylark watched the now familiar scene of camp, eyes scanning the treetops as patrols got ready to leave and Sparrowberry and Trailblaze sparred with Vixenpool.

What did the Darkspirit mean? All Skylark knew was that she couldn't wait to find out.

Chapter 6

Twitchpaw hummed a tune as she sat up in her stick-woven nest. It was sturdily made and lined with soft moss, leaves, and feathers.

We must seem more like birds than cats, she had thought with amusement when Flashflood and Laurelcall had first shown them their nests on their very own birch tree, a quarter-moon ago.

The day before rushed back into her mind. She was still getting used to being Trailblaze's apprentice, although the past few days had been rather mundane, mainly doing chores around camp. *Well, I'm happy as long as I'm not learning to kill people.*

Although Trailblaze had seemed to feel bad about it and promised that training would get interesting soon. Twitchpaw wondered if that was a good thing or not.

She gave her sleek grey pelt a quick grooming and slipped past Eeveepaw's nest, where he still lay curled up. Splashpaw's nest was stale and empty, reminding Twitchpaw that he had moved to the medicine tree. *Lichenpaw wasn't too happy about that,* she remembered. The littermates had spent their whole lives together after all.

To her surprise, Tricklepaw's nest was empty. He had always been the one to oversleep, but it smelled like he had been up for a while. *Kestrelflame must be training him hard,* she thought with a shudder.

Trailblaze noticed as she padded to the fresh-kill hole to grab a quick breakfast. "Twitchpaw!" he called from where he sat beside Sparrowberry. "Get ready, we're going to train soon!"

Crowpelt flicked his tail at him. "Thought we were going on dawn patrol together? Oh, never mind," he meowed as Trailblaze gave his friend a blank look.

"We'll hunt together later," Trailblaze promised. Sparrowberry

pressed her muzzle into his, purring a quick goodbye. Trailblaze's fur turned redder than normal, though the she-cat didn't seem to notice.

Twitchpaw munched down her hummingbird. She saw Lichenpaw padding onto the Great Tree towards Laurelcall and Crowpelt and realised she was instinctively looking for her siblings, too. It was strange to see the defender apprentice without them.

Trailblaze beckoned her with his white-tipped tail. He was hopping from paw to paw, amber eyes glowing impatiently.

"Where are we going?" Twitchpaw asked. *Please don't say Badgerplace, please don't say Badgerplace.*

"Bigroots," her mentor meowed cheerily. "Best place to hunt if you ask me. Well, you probably didn't ask. But *seriously*. The prey permanently hang there or something."

Twitchpaw breathed a sigh of relief. Hunting didn't seem too bad, in fact she found herself excited to learn. But as they padded towards the prey-rich place, she realised with a shiver where they were heading towards.

The MarshClan scent was pretty hard to miss.

The big trees came into view, their roots as tall as Twitchpaw and branches high and spreading. Immediately the scent of prey filled the air.

"During prey-scarce times, MarshClan is allowed to hunt on our territory up till here," Trailblaze explained with a swish of his tail. "It was part of the agreement of us joining the Clans. Bit of a dumb idea, I'd say. Hold on—Sparkstar probably wouldn't like me saying that. Forget that last part!"

Twitchpaw blinked as she took in the information. The cluster of tall trees stood about halfway in RobinClan's territory...MarshClan was allowed to hunt over *all* of it? Was that even fair?

An uncharacteristically serious look passed over Trailblaze's face for a moment. "RobinClan's territory wasn't meant to *be* a territory at

first. Just a space between the other Clans. It's small, but..." The ginger and white tom gave a smile that lighted his amber eyes. "We're resilient! We take what we can get!"

Can't be much worse than the rockplace, Twitchpaw thought as she recalled where the group had once stayed. She shivered thinking about the foxes that had ravaged the old camp. *I'd take a smaller but safer territory any day.*

"Come on!" Trailblaze had leaped ahead, orange pelt disappearing behind the roots.

Twitchpaw hesitated as he ran in the direction of the MarshClan border. She remembered the lesson on the first day of training; *don't go to near the border, or you're trespassing.* But she had to keep up with her mentor, so she hurried over.

Trailblaze smiled as she caught up, thankfully stopping before the border. "Took you long enough," he mewed. Twitchpaw felt her ears burn, but he seemed to move on rather quickly. "Do you see what's up there?" he mewed, looking into the sky.

Twitchpaw squinted. "Um...trees?" she guessed.

"It's called the Leap of Faith," Trailblaze explained, tail swishing. "We all had to jump it before the MarshClan cats left, to prove our...devotion to the Clan or something. You and the other apprentices will do it too at the end of your apprenticeship!"

The gap from tree to tree had never looked more wide. *Jump it?* "But..." Twitchpaw hesitated. "What if we-uh-fall painfully to our deaths?"

Trailblaze gave her an amused look. "By the end of your training, you'll be so good at jumping that it'll be a breeze. Trust me." Twitchpaw must have still looked worried because Trailblaze continued. "Even Eggnogshine made it!...don't tell him I said that."

"I guess I have nothing to worry about, then," Twitchpaw meowed.

Trailblaze nodded. "You don't," he assured her with a grin. "Now let's do some hunting!"

***

Twitchpaw was exhausted by the end of the session. Trailblaze had made her practise her hunting crouch and there were so many things to learn at once that she thought her brain was about to explode. *But it was worth it,* she decided as she held up the limp grey squirrel she had managed to catch.

Eeveepaw was back in the apprentices' birch when she padded back in after dropping her prey into the fresh-kill hole. Pride radiated in her body as she did—after more than a moon of the older cats catching food for them, now she could catch some for herself! And she would never have to go hungry again, unlike when she was a kittypet.

"Hiya, Twitch." Eeveepaw yawned and stretched, his brown fur rippling along his back. He grinned sleepily as he opened his violet eyes to look at her. "How was training?"

"I caught a squirrel!" Twitchpaw meowed happily as she leaped to the branch near her friend's nest. Eeveepaw's eyes grew wide with amazement. "Whoa! Great job," he meowed, though there was a slight edge to his voice. Twitchpaw tried to figure out why; was he jealous that she had made her first catch before him? She shook the thought from her mind as soon as it appeared. Eeveepaw wasn't like that.

"Is Alderwing taking you hunting anytime soon?" she asked instead.

"No idea. All we did today was go on patrol." Eeveepaw growled under his breath. "She never takes me on fun training sessions—it's like having cardboard for a mentor!"

Twitchpaw felt so bad for him. "I can't be that bad, right? At least you're further in training than me..." She trailed off. As interesting and exhausting as Trailblaze's sessions were, she couldn't help wondering if they were staying on track. Of course, she had barely any battle training—but that *surely* wasn't important. "Well, I'm sure she'll get to it soon," she assured Eeveepaw in hopes of relieving the situation.

"I hope so, because I need to get ahead in training. Tricklepaw is already learning battle moves!" Eeveepaw huffed. Twitchpaw couldn't help purring in amusement at the thought and he joined her. She hoped they never drifted apart.

Lichenpaw trotted up to the birch tree, glancing around before mewing a quick greeting. "Have you seen Splashpaw or Tricklepaw?"

"Tricklepaw's out training with Kestrelflame," Eeveepaw answered, a hint of envy in his voice. Twitchpaw brushed her grey pelt against his, before meowing, "I haven't seen Splashpaw all day." It was strange for the normally social tom. *He must be learning a lot.*

Lichenpaw shrugged. "Alright, well, tell them we're going to the Gathering tonight if you see them."

The Gathering? Trailblaze hadn't mentioned anything about that. But Twitchpaw vaguely remembered hearing Flashflood and Laurelcall talk about it as she passed by them on the Great Tree. *Something about a truce.*

Eeveepaw's violet eyes flashed with excitement. "Haha, Sparkstar took my request! I can't wait to meet the other Clans! They'll see what *amazing* apprentices we are now."

Twitchpaw perked her ears up. The other Clans could be scary on their own territories, but if they were going to meet under a truce, maybe they could be like friends. After all, they were all Clan cats, just like her and the other apprentices. It would be good to show that her Clan wasn't a threat in any way.

"Most of the Clan is going," Lichenpaw explained. "Except Chasecloud and Milowing, and Kiteheart and Crowpelt are staying behind to guard the camp. That'll show the other Clans that we're a real Clan!"

Eeveepaw's eyes glistened with eagerness. "They'll be so surprised that we're warriors! Maybe we'll even be feared!"

Though she was fairly certain that RobinClan wouldn't seem as

threatening as Eeveepaw and Lichenpaw were hoping, Twitchpaw felt her pelt ruffle. "You aren't going to pull any pranks at the Gathering, are you?"

Eeveepaw winked at her. "We'll see."

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Twitchpaw and Eeveepaw followed their mentors into the grassy forest clearing of Foursteps. The full moon hung in the night sky, glowing softly over the gathered cats. Clayrain and Duskstar were already there when RobinClan found a place to sit.

"Ay, it's the new cats!" A curly-furred ginger tom who smelled of MarshClan padded up to them excitedly, followed by a cream tom with log legs beside him. "We heard all about y'all! How's Clan life treating you"

"It's nice," Twitchpaw meowed. "Way better than being a kittypet." She relaxed at the friendly nature of the other apprentices. "I'm Twitchpaw by the way, and this is Eeveepaw."

"Aw, I agree." The ginger tom purred. "My name is Willowpaw, and this is my brother Tanglepaw. Didn't Claystar, Duskdream, and Riverbranch train you?"

"They trained the older cats—wait, did you say Clay*star*?" Eeveepaw gaped at them. Twitchpaw realised that Oakstar was surprisingly absent. *What happened to him?*

Tanglepaw leaned down to give the RobinClan apprentices a curious sniff. "None of your business. Aren't you the rogues who took over no-cat's land." His golden eyes flashed accusingly.

Twitchpaw backed up at the tom's harsh words. "Hey, we're just as much of a Clan as you are!" Eeveepaw reminded him indignantly.

At that, Tanglepaw snorted a laugh. "With a name like *Eeveepaw*? What is an Eevee, anyway?"

Twitchpaw felt her pelt bristle for her friend. "It's a very honourable name!" she found herself mewing to the cream tom. "And I know

you think we're intruders, but we belong to the forest now too." A memory from her first day of training flicked through her mind. "MarshClan is free to hunt on our land up till Bigroots anyway." Both Tanglepaw and Willowpaw looked surprised when she had finished. Just then, she heard Driftstar's yowl ring through the clearing, signalling that the Gathering had started.

"See you guys later," Willowpaw dipped his head as he padded away with his littermate.

When they were gone, Eeveepaw gave a relieved purr. "Thanks, Twitchpaw."

As they gazed up to watch the Gathering begin, Twitchpaw realised that she didn't feel so afraid of other cats when she was standing up for her friend. It felt good to step in and help sort things out. She purred as she shifted closer to Eeveepaw. *Maybe even without having to learn to fight, I am a little useful.*

Chapter 7

Skylark scanned the clearing of Foursteps. It was swarming with all kinds of cats all with different scents talking noisily. When the RobinClan cats appeared, however, everyone turned their heads toward them. She shuffled beside Splashpaw, wincing silently as they squeezed past the swarm of cats.

Where were Avalanchefall and the other medicine cats? The MarshClan and CavernClan leaders and deputies were already on the Foursteps, so their medicine cats were probably there too.

Tricklepaw trotted up confidently beside his parents, Creekstorm and Squishypelt. "I'm being tough," he growled, although the funny part was that his voice was still high-pitched. Skylark caught Eeveepaw rolling his eyes but had to admit that she found the young tom amusing.

"We're here, RobinClan," Sparkstar announced, loud enough just for his Clan to hear. Then he gestured to Vixenpool who was bringing up the back and she leaped after him toward the other leaders and deputies. Skylark saw that there was a mossy rock for SnowyClan, a log for MarshClan, and a pile of stones for CavernClan, with each leader sitting on top and their deputies just below. *Where will Sparkstar sit?*

Duskstar gestured toward a tree with low-hanging branches. Sparkstar nodded, nimbly climbing up the tree. Vixenpool settled in front of the trunk, looking in wonder at all the cats around. It was rare to see the ginger she-cat without Miloheart, but the brown elder had stayed in camp along with Chasecloud and Kiteheart. Claystar dipped his head to Sparkstar.

"Hey, it's the RobinClan cats!" A black she-cat Skylark recognised as Duskdream, a MarshClan cat who had come to their camp the first few days to teach the warriors the basics of fighting, was smiling at the warriors. "How are you all getting along?"

"Good, thanks," Vixenpool purred.

"Oh, can we meet the other apprentices?" Eeveepaw mewed to Alderwing. When she nodded, Eeveepaw jumped up and grinned at Twitchpaw. "Hooray! Come on Twitchpaw! Let's go make some new friends!"

"Hold on a second. You have to be careful not to spill any of our Clan secrets, okay?" Alderwing warned him. "Or else I'm coming with you."

"Argh, fine!" Eeveepaw agreed.

As the two padded off, Splashpaw sidled up to Skylark. "The medicine cats are there," he noticed, pointing his muzzle toward the front of the cluster of cats.

"Good spotting, Splashpaw," Skylark praised her apprentice as they started to pad toward the other medicine cats.

"Wait, Splashpaw! Don't leave me alone," Lichenpaw's eyes widened at her brother. Splashpaw paused and blinked at her. "It's okay. Tricklepaw is still here." The two looked behind to see Tricklepaw, growling at the older SnowyClan warriors.

Just then, Eggnogshine padded over, Flashflood and Laurelcall by his side. "Lichenpaw!" he mewed. "Do you want to go say hi to the CavernClan defenders before the Gathering starts?"

The ginger-and-brown she-cat gave a sigh of relief as she followed them. "Thank WishClan, yes!" Alderwing padded after them as well, catching up to her sister.

Skylark and Splashpaw squeezed past the crowd of cats to where the medicine cats were. Skylark and Splashpaw squeezed past the crowd of cats to where the medicine cats were. Sparrowberry and Trailblaze were talking with some SnowyClan cats, and as they passed by, the deaf red-brown she-cat shot the medicine cats an interested look.

Soon, they reached where the others were sitting near the leaders' steps. Splashpaw and Hurricanepaw greeted each other with a

friendly touch of noses. "Hey, look who's here!" Avalanchefall gazed at Skylark with shining blue eyes. Purring, Skylark rubbed her pelt against his.

"How've you guys been?" Scruffyheart asked with a friendly dip of his grey fluffy head. "First Gatherings are always exciting."

"We're doing great," Skylark told him. "Stocking up on herbs and everything like you told us." At that, a dark shadow passed over the MarshClan cat's face.

"Good to see you again," Juniperberry gave Skylark a reserved smile. "Have you talked to any Darkspirits since last meeting?"

"Actually, I have." She told the medicine cats about her short experience with the Darkspirit.

Juniperberry nodded when she was done. "A lot of them are like that. You just have to give them time to warm up to you." The calico whisked her tail. "You know, just as much as the Darkspirits can learn from you, I find you may be able to learn a lot from them too."

Really? Skylark rarely found herself spending time with cats apart from Splashpaw now that Avalanchefall was back in his Clan, let alone a bunch of burdened ghosts. The thought made her smile with amusement, though.

Splashpaw looked up. "I wonder if I'll ever dream of them," he mewed with wonder. "Have you dreamt of any before, Hurricanepaw?"

The fluffy yellow she-cat shook her head, seeming distracted. She glanced at her mentor and then back at Skylark and Splashpaw. Scruffyheart twitched his fluffy tail, hesitating.

Hurricanepaw turned to Skylark urgently. "A lot of our Clanmates are getting sick. We need a herb that grows on your territory!"

Scruffyheart sighed, then lowered his head in acceptance of the situation. "My apprentice is right. We'll need a few stalks of catmint, especially with leaf-bare right around the corner." He looked away.

"We used to be able to gather it freely a few moons earlier. When your territory was still no-cat's land."

"I'm sorry about that." The purple flowers appeared in Skylark's mind as she remembered, *I collected them with Avalanchefall!* "We already have the herb in our store, but we can pick more. I can bring it over as soon as possible."

"Yeah, we can go over and help!" Splashpaw purred. "I'm so glad medicine cats are allowed to cross borders."

Skylark had to agree with her apprentice. The best thing about being a medicine cat—well, apart from seeing WishClan face to face and collecting pretty herbs—was being able to meet up with the other medicine cats. Medicine cats didn't get into petty quarrels like warriors or defenders. They were the Clan's bridges to WishClan and each other.

"We would be most appreciative," Scruffyheart mewed with a hint of relief.

Just then, a voice rang out and silenced the cats. "Let the Gathering begin," Driftstar announced. She stood on the mossy rock, head and tail held high. "Fluffycloud has become a warrior and is sitting vigil at camp tonight. SnowyClan is very proud of him!"

"Fluffycloud! Fluffycloud!" The other medicine cats were chanting his name, so Skylark joined in, her voice merging with the others.

"And every cat in SnowyClan is glad leaf-fall is almost ending. We will be looking forward to leaf-bare and snow." Driftstar purred at the words. Avalanchefall nodded furiously in agreement, his blue eyes glittering, and Skylark's whiskers twitched in amusement.

Meanwhile, Claystar was giving the SnowyClan leader an annoyed gaze. "The prey is running well in MarshClan despite it being leaf-fall. This is my first Gathering as leader... since Oakstar had passed away." Claystar looked down in sorrow and what Skylark thought was frustration. "He lived an honourable life and died saving Redkit. MarshClan grieves for him. I have chosen Bayfur as my new deputy."

Murmurs of grief and sympathy resounded around the Clan cats.

"Oh no." Juniperberry looked worried. "So soon after Mallowsight's death?"

Skylark perked her ears up, turning to the calico medicine cat. "Who's that?"

"The previous MarshClan medicine cat. He died the leaf-bare before you came to the forest." Avalanchefall brushed his pelt comfortingly against Scruffyheart, whose tail had drooped to the ground. Up on the low tree, Skylark saw Sparkstar staring at the ground at the mention of Oakstar.

Claystar stepped back to let the leaders know he was done, his head still bowed solemnly. Skylark watched as Sparkstar gazed hesitantly at the other leaders. Snowystar nodded encouragingly at him, while Duskstar simply flicked her tail and turned away from him. Sparkstar lifted his head to address the cats.

"Apart from the obvious news that we've settled in well, RobinClan's five apprentices have been given mentors and are here today: Eeveepaw, Twitchpaw, Splashpaw, Tricklepaw, and Lichenpaw. Also, Chasecloud has given birth to Dustkit and Rainkit recently and is in camp taking care of them." Yowls of approval rang out among the Clans, calling out the names of the RobinClan apprentices. Skylark nudged Splashpaw and he smiled, sitting up straight as the cats cheered their names.

Duskstar shot a narrowed gaze at Claystar. "All getting along well, then? I thought you relied pretty hard on no-cat's land last leaf-bare."

Claystar only gave a smooth smile back at the CavernClan leader. "My Clan can support itself, thank you."

"Let's see if you still say so this leaf-bare," Duskstar retorted. The dark ginger tabby gave her an incredulous stare, throwing his paws up dramatically.

Splashpaw tilted his head towards the golden she-cat next to him.

"Is Claystar is telling the truth?"

Hurricanepaw frowned. "I guess there is less prey than normal? But it always gets like this near leaf-bare." She flicked an ear. "We've mainly been trying to heal up our sick cats."

"Oh, okay." Splashpaw nodded. "Some of our Clanmates told Sparkstar that your Clanmates started hunting on our territory, so I figured as much." He shot a teasing glance. "You're not going past Bigroots though, are you?"

"We'd never!" Hurricanepaw assured him passionately. "Claystar is an honourable leader!"

Scruffyheart blinked, looking like he was coming back from a dream. "That's why we were even afraid to pick herbs beyond that. We didn't know how your warriors would react..."

"Don't worry, RobinClan cats are really nice!" Avalanchefall chipped in with a warm look at Skylark that made a purr rise in her throat. *Sure, but I wish they were like you!*

"RobinClan is forever grateful to you for letting us settle down here. It's a much better life than many of us have known." Sparkstar bowed his head and stepped back. Skylark noticed his pelt was slightly bristled, but still... *Sparkstar's doing really well!*

Duskstar got up to her paws swiftly once Sparkstar was done. "CavernClan is doing well. We have two new warriors keeping their vigil at camp tonight, Foxbramble and Flintspark."

"Foxbramble! Flintspark!" The cats cheered as Skylark leaned in to whisper to Juniperberry. "Those are some pretty names."

"Duskstar is the best at naming," the calico medicine cat agreed, only a hint of pride creeping into her matter-of-fact voice.

Soon all the leaders had finished sharing their news. Just like that, the Gathering was over. The leaders and deputies padded back to their Clans, ready to lead them home. Skylark felt a little sad that the medicine cats' time together was so short.

"See you all next half-moon," Juniperberry mewed, dipping her head before leaping away skillfully through the gathered cats. *The day has only really just started for her,* Skylark realised. CavernClan cats were always the most awake and twilight and dawn, sleeping in bursts throughout the day. That made sense; Skylark had done just the same in Twolegplace. *Must be a nice way to live,* she thought. *No wonder they always look so active.*

Scruffyheart nodded to the other medicine cats. "Come on," he meowed to his apprentice as she hurried to his side. "It was nice seeing you guys."

"Bye!" Hurricanepaw called as she scrambled after her mentor.

"I'll make sure to bring the catmint to you!" Skylark promised after them.

Once most cats had cleared, Avalanchefall turned to face her. He pulled out a poppy flower from behind him and nosed it toward her. It was a beautiful shade of strawberry red-orange, its petals full and pretty. "I picked it just before greenleaf ended," he explained as he gazed up at her. "Thought you might like it."

Skylark stared at the poppy. It was sweet and smelled like spring. "It's beautiful."

"It is. " Avalanchefall purred. "I have to go now, but take care. Especially since you don't have a long coat like ours." His voice was teasing. Skylark whisked her tail into his fur with a *mrrow* of amusement. "Thank you, Avalanchefall. I love it."

"Skylark!" Splashpaw called. She looked over to see her Clan getting ready to leave Foursteps. Skylark stood up, brushed her tail over Avalanchefall's, and hurried back to her Clan.

As she followed them back to camp, Skylark kept looking at the poppy she held in her mouth. The golden amber leaves had started to fall around her. She hadn't even realised how lonely she had felt without the SnowyClan medicine cat, but now she had something to remember him by when she was in camp. A reminder that he would always be with her when she felt alone. She pushed it into her fur

and smiled. The flower looked amazing under the full moon.

Chapter 8

The dawn patrol was getting ready to leave as Twitchpaw padded from the warriors' chestnut tree alongside her mentor. Puddlesoar, Squishypelt, and Crowpelt were standing beside Vixenpool, looking ready to head out. "Hey, Trail!" Crowpelt called to his friend. "Do you and Twitchpaw want to come along?"

"Later!" Trailblaze answered. "We're going to train first."

"Where are we going?" Twitchpaw asked as she followed her mentor through the treetops.

Trailblaze gestured towards the training tree, and Twitchpaw felt excitement course through her pelt. That was where she used to play hide-and-seek with the other apprentices! And she remembered a fun training session a while ago, where Trailblaze had used the widespread branches to teach her how to nimbly move and leap through branches.

"Twitch!" Eeveepaw called out to her in astonishment. He was standing at the training tree alongside Alderwing. "What are you guys doing here?"

Kestrelflame strode up with Tricklepaw by her side. "Battle moves, of course," she answered in the way that made everything she said sound like a growl.

Oh no. Twitchpaw froze. Panic flooded through her, and she felt the dreaded memories flashing back in her mind. *I can't. I can't start learning how to kill people.* Part of her had assumed that since there had been no mention of it, they weren't going to learn fighting at all —but Twitchpaw realised that had been wishful thinking.

Eeveepaw gasped and pranced around, his white-tipped tail flicking eagerly. "FINALLY! I've been asking for *ages*." He shot a raised-eyebrowed look at Alderwing, who returned his gaze with a defensive stare. "Well, you just had to be patient."

Trailblaze led Twitchpaw over to the training tree. It was shorter than most other trees in camp, with long, sturdy branches spreading this way and that, some reaching for the sky and others trailing towards the ground. Twitchpaw met Eeveepaw and Tricklepaw in the centre of the trunk, mind still racing.

Alderwing settled in a nook just above them. "Okay, so Eeveepaw and Twitchpaw, I want you to try and pin each other down. We can go over tactics later."

"Pin each other down?" Eeveepaw clarified with a smirk. "At the same time?" Alderwing shook her head at her apprentice with a sigh.

Twitchpaw felt her heart rattle in her chest. *Did she just say pin each other down?* An image of Eeveepaw on her, immobilising her to the ground filled her mind and she tried her best to push it away. "Um, how about Tricklepaw goes first?" She glanced nervously at the pale tom, who thankfully looked like he was raring to try. Trailblaze looked confused, but Kestrelflame nodded approvingly.

The fawn apprentice jumped in front of Eeveepaw as an ominous grin spread over his face. Twitchpaw had never seen the tom look more menacing.

Tricklepaw leaped, his paws aiming for Eeveepaw, but Eeveepaw scampered away and scaled a branch. He clung on with his front paws, before swinging himself towards Tricklepaw. Tricklepaw was pinned down for a heartbeat before the apprentice struggled out of Eeveepaw's grip, using a lower branch to push himself up, his wide paws landing in Eeveepaw's white chest. Eeveepaw let out a gasp of breath as he was knocked into a branch, then pulled out of the other apprentice's grip and ran up the branch, pelting red and brown leaves and bark at a confused Tricklepaw below.

"That's cheating!" Kestrelflame huffed. "Or at least, not very tough."

"Yeah!" Tricklepaw called from below. "I was winning!"

"And now...you're not." Eeveepaw replied smugly through gasps for breath.

Alderwing flicked her tail. "Not bad, but leaves can only get you so far." She gestured at the very unharmed Tricklepaw. Eeveepaw's smile fell at her words. "Which is why a better move would be to jump and land on your enemy from above."

"Yeah, they'd think it's raining cats and run away screaming," Sarcasm edged Eeveepaw's voice.

"Can you take this more seriously?" Alderwing's mew was exasperated.

Twitchpaw shifted closer to Trailblaze, who seemed to be staring into blank space. "Can I....sit this training session out?" she whispered, her pelt burning with embarrassment. What kind of apprentice refused her own training?

One who didn't want to learn to kill, apparently.

"Hmm?" Trailblaze blinked at her, amber eyes clearing like he had been deep in thought. "Why's that?"

So many reasons, and too little that she could say. Twitchpaw took a deep breath and tried to push the dark thoughts to the back of her mind. "I don't want to hurt other cats."

Trailblaze gave her a sympathetic look. "Oh, Twitchpaw. No one does. Who looks at another cat and goes, 'they're dead meat'?" Twitchpaw shuddered, and Kestrelflame turned over to stare at them with fiery eyes.

"Except Kestrelflame," Trailblaze corrected. "No, we fight to defend our home from wild animals or intruders. Show the other Clans they can't mess with us." He gave her a smile she couldn't return.

"But...what if the intruders don't *know* that cats live here?" Twitchpaw swallowed the rising guilt in her stomach.

"That's why we have to let them know," Trailblaze explained. "But if you don't want to train today, you can just watch for a bit. I get it!"

You won't be able to avoid this forever, a voice in her head warned.

This is your own fault.

Shakily, Twitchpaw stepped back next to Alderwing, who was now coaching Eeveepaw from the side. "How about we work on the basics? Show me your stance."

Eeveepaw flicked his ear nonchalantly. "I already know my stance," he pointed out.

"Yes, but your hind legs weren't tucked in as much when Tricklepaw pounced." Alderwing padded next to him as Eeveepaw relented, crouching down. "Try to keep lighter on your paws. You need to be ready to leap away so you can counterattack, like this." The calico leaped into the air and aimed at her friend, her claws making a *swish* sound as they swiped.

The brown apprentice turned to Twitchpaw. "Can I try on you?"

Twitchpaw was about to reject, but the words were caught in her throat. Eeveepaw was her best friend. And she was training to be a warrior apprentice alongside him, so she was going to have to get used to this. *I have to.* What kind of Clanmate was she if she didn't? "Yeah... okay," she mumbled instead.

"Remember to balance your weight." Alderwing's reminder was met by an impatient tail flick by Eeveepaw. He crouched down, the violet eyes that had always been lit with excitement and friendliness now fixed on her, making her feel like a trapped animal.

Time seemed to slow down as Eeveepaw leaped into the air. Twitchpaw could see every hair of his brown fur, the strength in his leg muscles.

He was attacking her.

Consciously, Twitchpaw knew with certainty that she was in no real danger. This was a *training* session with a friend who would never hurt her. And yet...as he swiped down with his paws...

She felt herself run, driven by pure instinct. Her eyes searched for a place to hide. Her paws scaled a branch reaching up towards the

sky, claws digging into the bark for dear life as Twitchpaw flattened herself to the branch. She could hear her heartbeat fast and loud along with paralysing fear and guilt.

"Twitchpaw?" Eeveepaw called out to her. "What's wrong—was I really that scary? You know my claws were sheathed." His meow grew closer as she heard him climbing towards her.

Twitchpaw couldn't look at him. Couldn't stand to see the disappointment in Trailblaze's face when he realised that his apprentice was useless at the very thing warriors were trained to do. But no matter how hard she tried to take in her mentor's words, that they were only trying to defend their Clan...she could feel nothing but panic when Eeveepaw had jumped at her.

Maybe they were right, she realised with a rush of dejection. *Hiding is the only thing I can do.*

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Twitchpaw felt her tail brush past the soft grass as it trailed behind her. That training session had been the worst, and she hadn't even trained herself. She had been relieved when Trailblaze dismissed her early, but now the feeling was replaced with one of guilt. She headed straight for the apprentices' birch, fearing her Clanmates' judgemental glances at her early dismissal.

A rustle came from beside her as Skylark approached, looking absent-minded as she strolled toward Twitchpaw with herbs in her jaws.

The medicine cat blinked when she saw Twitchpaw, as if she hadn't noticed her presence until then. "Oh, hello," Skylark greeted. "Training...uh, going good?" she added when the grey she-cat didn't respond.

Twitchpaw sighed. "We're starting to learn battle moves." She stared down at her paws, eyeing them as if they might suddenly morph into the sharp claws of a lion. "I don't want to, but I'm a warrior, aren't I?" A wave of resignation washed over her grey pelt.

Skylark looked away, her mismatched eyes focusing on herbs as she plucked them from a nearby patch. "If being a warrior doesn't make you happy, then there's no point in being one. I suppose you could change your role?"

"I couldn't!" Twitchpaw gaped at Skylark in disbelief. How could she even mention it so casually? "Trailblaze would be so sad, and Eeveepaw would be training alone with Tricklepaw!"

Skylark met her green eyes briefly, her gaze mildly surprised. "You care about them that much?"

"O-of course." The grey apprentice looked down. She had never questioned it, but maybe...that *was* part of the reason she was staying a warrior apprentice. But surely Skylark would understand, as a medicine cat? Her whole job was to care for her Clanmates after all.

But the medicine cat just looked away into the thick brush of the forest. "I'd better go find Splashpaw," she meowed abruptly. "See you around."

Twitchpaw watched the white-and-brown she-cat dart back into the trees. Skylark always seemed like a mystery to her. Twitchpaw had always enjoyed figuring other cats out. But Skylark had always been rather quiet, and now that she was a medicine cat, she seemed to have something greater shimmering in her eyes.

"Stars, my belly thinks my throat's torn out." As Twitchpaw padded past the base of the Great Tree, she heard Moosebloom's voice from above.

Creekstorm sighed as the branch creaked under her. "Same. Bad luck with hunting today, I guess."

"It's only leaf-fall," Moosebloom sighed. "Why in WishClan is the prey starting to hide away *already*?"

The black she-cat gave a low growl. "They're not so much *hiding* as they are being hoarded. I suspect MarshClan is grabbing all the prey they can from our territory before leaf-bare!"

Moosebloom gasped. "What drama!" the grey and white she-cat exclaimed. "They're allowed to, but that's so greedy of them!"

"I know." Creekstorm's meow sounded defeated. "We'll just have to do what we can."

Twitchpaw perked her ears up, feeling shock pulse through her body. Was the black warrior right? Was MarshClan the reason their prey levels were already depleting? *No, but they* are *allowed to!* She recalled what Trailblaze had told her during training. *So it must be fine.*

"Hey, Twitchpaw!" Laurelcall called as she tried to slink up the birch tree as casually as possible. But Eggnogshine, Flashflood, and Laurelcall had apparently caught sight of her while sorting out the fresh-kill. She knew from Lichenpaw that defenders were in charge of making sure every cat got enough food. "Where's Trailblaze?"

"He didn't come back to camp with me," Twitchpaw admitted, hoping they wouldn't ask her why.

Laurelcall's friendly smile dropped for a heartbeat. "Crow and I were thinking of going on a walk if he was free..."

"He probably got distracted by a pretty rock or something," Flashflood remarked, raising her eyebrows pointedly at Eggnogshine. The golden tom flattened his long ears. "H-hey!" he protested as the calico continued to smirk at him. "Rocks can be *very* cool, okay?"

Laurelcall sighed. "Thanks anyway, Twitchpaw."

I guess they're drifting apart, Twitchpaw thought. Trailblaze used to always spend time with his friends, right up until...Twitchpaw felt the realisation hit her like icy cold water. *Until I became his apprentice.*

Was this partly *her* fault? The apprentice curled up in her nest miserably, her thoughts running wild in her mind. *Great. I'm already a bad apprentice for refusing battle training, and now I might be making things worse in the Clan too.*

Chapter 9

"You again." The Darkspirit's mew was deep and layered as he shifted through the dim lighting. "I don't know why you keep trying. It's not going to help me move to WishClan any faster."

Skylark stepped forward, toward the shadowed silhouette of the ghost cat. His form was almost liquid, wobbling around and his paws melting into the branch below. "You're the one who came to me."

"Ah, so I did." The Darkspirit's echoing mew held a touch of amusement.

Skylark moved toward him eagerly. After days of quiet nights, she had not been expecting to see one that night at all. "So, are you here to tell me why you died?"

The Darkspirit seemed to go still for a moment. "I genuinely don't remember," he meowed slowly. "But I do need to show you something." Suddenly the ground lurched under her. Skylark gasped, grabbing on to the branch for dear life. If she fell from such a height...

Wait, this is a dream, she reminded herself.

But the floor under her paws had turned wet and marshy. She was no longer in RobinClan camp; in fact, this seemed like... *MarshClan!* Skylark stared in awe as she now stood in front of woven reed dens at the sides of the swamp. A dark ginger tabby was pacing back and forth in front of a fluffy grey cat. *Claystar and Scruffyheart,* she recognised immediately. Was this really happening? Was it a memory? Whatever it was, Skylark couldn't help being fascinated. Never as a stray did she ever think she would get to join a Clan and see...whatever this was.

"Cindersplash is sick now, too," Claystar was meowing. "And you know Oakstar *died* to save their kit. We can't let his mate die too,

can we?" An image of a ginger-and-white she-cat flashed past Skylark's eyes.

"It only grows on RobinClan territory, Claystar," Scruffyheart replied, amber eyes darkened with worry.

Claystar sighed. "We had access to such an important herb for so long, and now it's taken just like that! Now it's in their territory, and we have to *beg* just to have some...I won't let more cats die on me, Scruffyheart."

"I know." Scruffyheart dipped his head. "I won't either. Hurricanepaw and I have been doing what we can, but it's tough without Mallowsight." His mew was choked with grief. Skylark remembered that that was MarshClan's old medicine cat, who must have been Scruffyheart's mentor. A surprising wave of empathy for the other medicine cat pricked her patched fur.

The scene slowly faded, and the Darkspirit was looking at her pointedly. Skylark blinked as she got back into reality. She had to go help MarshClan! Slowly the camp returned in a tornado of colour and noise as she was shoved back into fresh air. The ominous atmosphere lingered around her. She couldn't help shivering, not just from the leaf-fall air but also from what she had just seen.

The medicine cat got up from her nest immediately and searched through the herb store. *We're coming,* she silently promised as she pulled out the pungent herb from a divot in the ash tree.

Thinking back on the dream, she realised that seeing from the MarshClan cats' point-of-view had been eye-opening. Skylark had never really internalised that RobinClan settling into the forest would cause such havoc in other Clans. But Scruffyheart was her friend, just like Avalanchefall was, and he needed help. The intensity in both his and Claystar's gaze when they talked about his Clan was startling. *I guess they really care about their cats.*

She looked over at Splashpaw's nest and realised that the tortoiseshell tom's nest was empty. Skylark pushed through the leaves of the ash tree and crossed the branches easily to the Great Tree. Vixenpool was sharing tongues with Alderwing, her foxy

muzzle laying on the fluffy calico's chest, and the lithe ginger deputy paused to meow a quick hello to Skylark as she strode by.

Of course she would, Skylark thought. Vixenpool almost rivalled Splashpaw in her friendliness. Though...it did seem nice to be able to share another cat's warmth when the days were getting chilly. She adjusted the poppy in her shoulder fur, wishing that the flower could be Avalanchefall with her instead.

There were a few cats gathered around a lower bulging branch of the Great Tree. Sparkstar, Creekstorm, Squishypelt, and Splashpaw were around Trailblaze and Sparrowberry, who were both looking like they had seen WishClan for the first time.

"Mates?" Creekstorm purred. "That's great. Congratulations." Sparrowberry bumped her friend's shoulder, purring gratefully.

Trailblaze and Sparrowberry? Skylark had noticed the pair spending more time together ever since the orange and white tom had chosen the path of a warrior.

Sparkstar touched his nose to Trailblaze's, his olive green eyes sparkling. "I'm happy for you." The tuxedo cat paused to look beyond him. "Have you told anyone else yet?"

"Sparrowberry wants to take it slow for now," Trailblaze translated with a purr at the reddish-brown she-cat. "And I suppose I'll tell Laurel and Crow at some point. But you guys are the first to know."

Splashpaw purred joyously. "I hope you make each other happy!"

Just then, Lichenpaw padded over with a slightly worried look on her face. "Sorry to disturb," she murmured. "But the fresh-kill pile is dwindling, so it's hard to make sure every cat gets what they need."

Sparkstar straightened up, the joyful mood temporarily dampened. He dipped his head to Lichenpaw. "Okay, I'll send a hunting party out." Sparrowberry nodded as her new mate translated the news to her, blue eyes shining. Trailblaze smiled. "Who could resist a good hunting session, huh? We'd love to go! Shall we hunt by Bigroots?"

Sparkstar shook his head with a wry expression. "All the patrols sent

out at that area have come back empty-pawed. I think it's better that you hunt in the treetops today."

As the cats started to leave, Skylark stepped down to get Splashpaw's attention. The herbs seemed to speak for themselves as Splashpaw immediately jumped up when he saw the catmint. "Are we going now?"

Lichenpaw looked intrigued. "Where are you going; to pick herbs? Could I come with you?" The ginger and cinnamon tabby gave a purr. "I've always wondered what herbs do what!"

Skylark was unsure what to do. *Why does a defender apprentice want to learn about herbs?* Sure, Lichenpaw had always struck her as the kind of cat to be an overachiever, but *come on.* Luckily, Splashpaw shook his head. "We're doing something kind of important right now."

Lichenpaw looked slightly disappointed, but nodded. "Well, I'm glad you're having a good time training at least. Your job is so important."

"I know," Splashpaw purred.

As Skylark and Splashpaw climbed down the Great Tree, she had to wonder why Lichenpaw seemed like she was so interested in medicine cat training, although she was a defender. They crossed the leaf-strewn grass, the cool air ruffling in Skylark's short fur. She glanced up at the sky, a habit she had picked up from Avalanchefall in case WishClan had sent some sort of sign.

They hadn't, but Skylark did see the clouds making a really pretty shape of a squirrel head.

"So," Skylark decided to break the silence. "What was your sister talking about?"

Splashpaw looked confused for a second but then started purring. "Oh, well...did I ever tell you I used to want to leave the Clan at first? I guess I missed how my family used to be, our peaceful life by the lake. But Lichenpaw and I are glad I found something I love

about Clan life; so our family is still here together."

I've never had a family before, Skylark thought. Growing up in Twolegplace without a Twoleg, she had been mostly alone to take care of herself. She had had cats that she was friendly with, sure...but none that she could ever think of loving as much as Splashpaw did for his family. She hadn't even had a real friend before Avalanchefall.

The brush of forest grew less dense as Skylark made her way forward, passing by the damp grass past the stream as they made their way towards Bigroots. MarshClan scent hung fresh in the air. *I guess they were hunting here earlier.* But hadn't Lichenpaw said that the prey levels in RobinClan were already getting low?

The thick mud sticking to Skylark's pelt made her hiss slightly as she and Splashpaw padded into MarshClan territory. Leaf wraps hung from both their jaws. *Hopefully enough to save MarshClan.* The patrol had reported that MarshClan had not been patrolling much recently, which made her worried. *I hope Scruffyheart and Hurricanepaw are doing okay.*

When they stepped into camp, they were greeted with exclamations of relief. As the RobinClan medicine cats padded past though, Skylark thought she heard an angry hiss from a pale ginger she-cat. "They're the reason our Clanmates even got this bad." She narrowed her eyes at the cats.

"Yeah, their territory has *all* the herbs." a brown tom beside her agreed.

Skylark flinched but pretended not to hear. The commotion among the cats faded as she approached the medicine den, Splashpaw by her side.

"Skylark! Splashpaw!" Hurricanepaw ran out of the den layered with sticks, dark grey eyes lit with relief. "Oh my WishClan, do I smell catmint? Scruffyheart!"

"What? Hold o—" Scruffyheart's strained voice was cut off by coughing from inside the den.

Splashpaw put down his leaf wrap and peered into the den. "Stars, do you need help around here?" The yellow-furred medicine cat apprentice nodded, and Skylark noticed the shadows under her eyes. "Whitecough," she explained. "But it's turning to greencough for some cats; Ravenspring, Swampwhisker, and now even Cindersplash!"

Cindersplash! Skylark remembered the name with a jolt from her meeting with the Darkspirit earlier. So she had been seeing what was happening in MarshClan in real-time. Skylark followed Hurricanepaw into the medicine den. The smell of sickness and pus was strong and made her gag.

The den was nearly full of cats to treat. From apprentices to full-grown warriors, almost half the Clan had succumbed to the sickness. As Skylark treated an old dark grey tom, she watched Splashpaw from the corner of her eye. Her apprentice grabbed a bunch of catmint and juniper berries, gently pushing it toward a light grey warrior. "Here," he whispered, as softly as if he was handling a kit. "Eat this and try to rest."

The warrior licked the herbs, but couldn't seem to swallow as she hacked them up soon after. Splashpaw stepped back, surprised. "Try some honey or tansy," Skylark suggested.

"Oh right! That'll ease her throat..." Splashpaw dug through the leaf wrap they had brought until he found the right herb. Carefully, he put it in the cat's mouth. The warrior coughed roughly but managed to swallow the tansy. Her head drooped and she curled up into a ball with a sigh.

Skylark turned to a white-and-ginger she-cat and started to treat her, too. Her pelt seemed familiar...she realised in a jolt that it was Cindersplash, Oakstar's mate. *She needs to live,* Skylark thought. Oakstar may have been in WishClan, but it wasn't this cat's time to die yet.

When the RobinClan medicine cat placed the petals in front of her, the queen tried to chew the herb but couldn't seem to swallow it.

"Try gently pushing her throat to help her swallow. It worked on

that ginger tom." Splashpaw called out to his mentor.

The queen's eyes were closed now, but Skylark still managed to feed her the herb. Gently, she helped push the herb down her throat until she eventually swallowed it. "Good thinking," she called back to Splashpaw, secretly impressed.

The queen opened her eyes weakly, revealing blue-green eyes glossy with fever. "Redkit," she whispered. Skylark followed her gaze to outside the medicine den, where a little dark ginger and brown she-kit was peering in anxiously. An older blue-grey she-cat apprentice was holding on to her, making sure she didn't go inside, but the kit's yellow eyes were darkened with sorrow. Too much sorrow for a kit that young.

Skylark turned back to Cindersplash, a new feeling welling inside her. "Redkit is okay, and so are you. You are not going to die."

The she-cat coughed weakly, and Skylark pushed more catmint towards her. "How...do you know?" she asked wonderingly. "You sound so certain...almost like WishClan told you themselves."

WishClan. Cindersplash believed in their ancestors, just like she did. Skylark's faith had helped her get through hard times before; Chasecloud's kitting, when Avalanchefall left...they had always promised to watch over her and help her if needed. And now, maybe this queen's faith would give her the hope she needed to fight through the greencough.

"Maybe they did."

The MarshClan cat purred gently before letting her eyes fall shut again, albeit with a more peaceful expression.

Scruffyheart happened to be taking water for the cat next to the one she was treating. "Thanks so much for the help," he meowed, ducking his head shyly.

Skylark flicked her tail, nodding back at the shaggy medicine cat. "You needed it," she meowed back matter-of-factly before cringing. *Why did I say that?*

The dark grey cat nodded, watching Hurricanepaw give out moss-soaked water to give to the sick cats. "You know, I don't really like asking for help from other Clans." Scruffyheart murmured. "But the whitecough turned to greencough before I knew what was happening." He looked at her with warm amber eyes. "Thank you. Without the two of you, I don't know what we would have done."

The two of us. Skylark had never been referred to as on the same level as Splashpaw like that; she had always been the mentor, and him the apprentice. But she had to admit, this would have been so much harder without the tortoiseshell tom. And it felt good to have a partner again after Avalanchefall had left.

The swamp sank into her white-and-brown fur once again as the two medicine cats padded outside. Skylark gritted her teeth and let out a soft hiss. *I'm going to need to shower for a moon after this.*

She noticed her apprentice on one of the floating platforms with two MarshClan apprentices she had noticed at the Gathering. They looked like they were play-fighting, jumping and ducking towards each other. "Splashpaw, time to go," she called, almost feeling bad because of how much fun they seemed to be having.

Her pale tortie apprentice glanced up at her. "Okay! Bye guys!" The apprentices touched noses as a friendly goodbye as Skylark turned to Scruffyheart. "Thank you," she mewed.

"Thank *you* for bringing the herb." Scruffyheart dipped his head to her.

As Skylark and Splashpaw were leaving the camp, Claystar came up to them. Skylark almost mewed a friendly greeting, before remembering that although she had had a dream about him, Claystar had barely talked to her before. Even when in their camp, the dark ginger tabby had always been busy training the warriors anyway.

"Thank you for the catmint." His voice was as deep and tough as in her dream, but his cloudy blue eyes were wide with gratitude.

"No problem," Skylark meowed. "Least I could do, since our territory

used to be no-cat's land. And uh, your cats clearly needed it."

The MarshClan leader flicked his tail. "We did." The slightest bit of annoyance crept into his mew. Claystar blinked at Skylark, tilting his head. "How is your Clan doing, by the way? Especially with your first leaf-bare coming up?"

Skylark was surprised that Claystar would care about RobinClan even after he had finished training their warriors. But given the fierce care for his Clan that she had seen in her dream, she figured it made sense. *Or he's just being friendly or something.* "Our prey levels are decreasing a bit, but nothing to worry about."

Claystar drew back a bit, dipping his head as he paused. "But you still have the treetops?" he questioned. "Surely that gives you enough prey."

Skylark shrugged. "I'm a medicine cat, how would I know about all that?" she pointed out wryly.

"Right." Claystar purred and shook his head. "It's been nice talking to you, Skylark," he meowed before turning back towards a sleek brown tom that she recognised as Bayfur.

As they walked back to RobinClan territory, Splashpaw trotted eagerly beside her."I can't wait to see them at the next Gathering!" He looked up at her eagerly. "They taught me all kinds of warrior moves, oh, Lichenpaw will be so happy about that."

Skylark stared at him, speechless. In the span of a single visit, Splashpaw had somehow made friends with two MarshClan apprentices *and* learned battle moves from them. How was that even possible?

Though I guess I got to talk to MarshClan cats too. Skylark thought of Cindersplash, Scruffyheart, even Claystar. Healing and helping other cats had always been the less interesting job as compared to talking with WishClan and the Darkspirits...but now she wondered if it was actually more important.

"I can't believe you can make friends with every cat." Skylark tried

to make her mew lighthearted as they kept pace with each other.

Splashpaw paused, then purred. "I like talking to cats. Lucky my mentor is one of the best!" He butted her affectionately with his shoulder.

Skylark's brown paws stumbled below her in surprise. Partly because of the amiable gesture, but even more that the tortoiseshell tom had called her a friend.

Chapter 10

Twitchpaw scrambled to catch up to Trailblaze. She felt her paws easily speed over the warm leaf-fall grass, leaves crunching beneath her as the chilly wind rushed past her grey fur. After training with her mentor for a moon, she had grown used to the ginger and white tom's fast-paced lessons.

I may not be the strongest or bravest apprentice, but now I might just be the fastest!

"Are you up for some exploring today?" Trailblaze asked as she caught up with him, panting. "Maybe we could venture outside of Clan territory; say, maybe Twolegplace?" His amber eyes shone with excitement.

Normally she would have agreed, but this time...Twitchpaw hesitated, her tail bushing out. "I can't."

"Why not?" Trailblaze blinked at her inquiringly. "It would be a fun adventure...learn about kittypets...something a little more chill before tomorrow's battle training." He flicked his tail as if proud of himself for planning ahead.

"I can't do that either!" Twitchpaw felt her heart speed up as she gazed at her mentor with what she supposed was a wild expression. After the fateful training session that day, she knew that she would never want or be able to go through that kind of training again. "Trailblaze, I—can't. I'm so sorry."

Please don't get mad at me. Please...let me still get my warrior name... It suddenly dawned on Twitchpaw how very, very unlikely that would be. Even Eeveepaw was getting better at battle moves under Alderwing's strict training. And Tricklepaw...

Trailblaze simply dipped his head to her. "Okay." His amber eyes shone with curiosity, but he didn't push any further. "I'll find some way to explain to Sparkstar. Although, you know fighting is a

necessary part of your training, right?"

Twitchpaw sighed. "I know," she whispered.

Trailblaze nodded, seeming satisfied. "I have an idea of what to do instead; how about we learn some tail signals? They are very very useful!" The warrior seemed to light up with pride, his ears flushing slightly, almost as if he was embarrassed. Twitchpaw wondered if that had anything to do with Sparrowberry; his crush on the long-furred red and brown she-cat was obvious to any cat who spent any time around the pair.

"They're usually used in battle, but can be helpful in hunting and patrols too." Trailblaze dropped into a crouch next to her. "Sometimes all we need is another cat with us to keep the energy up. And double the senses means double the prey! At least, I think that's how it works."

Twitchpaw gave a *mrrow* of amusement. "I can't imagine the energy ever being down with you."

"You have a point there," Trailblaze winked at her. He held his tail up, the white tip hanging over his ginger back. "This means 'follow me'."

Twitchpaw followed her mentor's pawsteps, fascinated. As they padded through the cool forest, her mentor showed her the signs for 'danger', 'get down', and 'stay behind'. It was definitely better than battle training, and honestly, it did make Twitchpaw feel a little safer to know that another cat had her back.

"This one was made up by me and Sparrowberry," Trailblaze explained with a purr. He held up his tail, before swishing it in a quick arc. "It's a check-in sign, like 'are you good?' Or 'have you found something'?"

Twitchpaw tried, swishing her tail in the same way as her mentor. "Wow," she whispered. "I never knew there was a sign for that."

Trailblaze leaped ahead, his white paws buried in the fallen leaves. "Yeah. Sometimes checking in on your Clanmates is the most

important thing you can do, I guess. Maybe they've scented prey you haven't, or seen something dangerous, or are injured."

Twitchpaw decided that it was her new favourite signal. As the training session went on, she realised that it was the most engaged she had been during training. When Trailblaze stepped back to let her try signalling to him, she could already feel her mind racing to remember all of them.

She raised her muzzle to the air, breathing in the scents in the air. There was a squirrel to the right, in the hickory bushes. *A squirrel!* Twitchpaw felt her belly growl, yearning for the warm, savoury flesh. If they caught it, it would be an amazing present for the Clan. Twitchpaw pointed her tail in the direction, keeping it low for *spread out.*

Trailblaze dropped into a crouch and started stalking towards the bushes, his pawsteps light and balanced. His tail was trembling with anticipation, but well off the grass to make a noise. He sent back a signal with his tail rippling. *I think that means move forward slowly?* Twitchpaw started her stalk forward, trying to keep her pelt melting into the shadows below the trees. She kept her eyes on her mentor, and with a dart into the bushes, the squirrel raced out towards her. Twitchpaw pelted towards it, driving it in Trailblaze's general direction, but quickly realised that she wasn't going to catch up to it. She tried to remember what to tell Trailblaze...was it a kinked tail for *go for it*? With no time to think, she kinked her tail over her back.

Trailblaze seemed to react as soon as she did. He leapt off the ground readily and his claws grabbed onto the squirrel's grey fur. In an instant, it was dead.

Twitchpaw felt pride blossom in her heart. *Maybe I am cut out to be a warrior,* she thought with relief.

When Trailblaze swished his tail in the check-in sign, she found in relief that she could sign back a flick of her tail, a signal that everything was okay.

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The sun was sunk low in the sky when Twitchpaw hauled herself back to camp. She carried the squirrel in her jaws, as well as a wad of wet moss for the camp's water supply. Trailblaze had made an immediate beeline for Sparrowberry, only nodding hello to Laurelcall and Crowpelt as he rushed by.

Mistleswoop was talking with her mate Puddlesoar overhead, while Lichenpaw perked her ears to listen in. Kiteheart was outside the nursery willow, playing with Dustkit and Rainkit, while Chasecloud shared prey with Crowpelt near the warriors' chestnut. Creekstorm and Sparkstar lay beside Stormfall, listening to the elder talk.

"Is that all you caught?" Stormfall called to her in dismay.

Twitchpaw realised that there were only two small voles left in the fresh-kill store. "That was all the hunting patrol caught," the elder added.

The grey she-cat flicked her tail anxiously. "That's hardly enough for everyone."

"Take one, you've earned it," Sparkstar meowed. "The kits and elders have already eaten. Stormfall is just being a grump."

Twitchpaw bowed her head, picking up the vole and looking around for Eeveepaw to share it with. Where was her friend? She padded towards the apprentices' birch, wondering if he had ended training yet.

She didn't have to wonder for long. Eeveepaw was standing on a branch a few fox-tails away, facing his calico mentor. Twitchpaw had gotten better at differentiating Alderwing and Flashflood; Alderwing's eyes were slightly lighter, and Flashflood spent most of her time with Eggnogshine and Laurelcall, only occasionally crossing paths with her sister. But then Twitchpaw narrowed her eyes in confusion; what were they doing?

Alderwing bristled. "I'm trying to help you learn, Eeveepaw," she growled. "If only you didn't keep goofing around-"

"I'm *not* goofing around," Eeveepaw argued. His tail flicked behind

him irritably. "I want to be a warrior too, you know! I want to be better than Tricklepaw, I want to be feared!"

"You're not ready yet!" Alderwing hissed. "I'm trying to teach you the basics, but you keep jumping the gun!" Twitchpaw couldn't be sure, but she saw the calico's paws lift off the ground for a heartbeat, almost as if she was flying.

"Then...why is *Tricklepaw* ready?!" Eeveepaw cried incredulously.

"You two are different cats!"

"And we have different mentors." His violet eyes flashed in annoyance. Alderwing recoiled, the words seeming to war in her green eyes. Without another word, she stepped away towards Vixenpool, tail lashing. "Training's over."

Twitchpaw gasped. She knew that Eeveepaw had felt like that for a while, but she hadn't known the conflict would get so bad.

She dropped her vole in the fresh-kill pile and crossed over to her friend. He turned his head, acknowledging her presence, but his pelt was still prickled from the conflict. "Well..." Twitchpaw hesitated. "That was a bit harsh."

Eeveepaw snorted. "Uh, yeah. But you gotta understand," his expression was earnest, "I can't deal with my mentor anymore! She's holding me back!"

Twitchpaw thought about how Trailblaze was the opposite, pushing her forward almost before she was ready. But being Eeveepaw, a cat who had *always* wanted to be respected, the cat who had asked Sparkstar personally to be his apprentice...she could see how Alderwing's stricter ways would feel suffocating for him.

"There's nothing wrong with going slow," she mumbled.

Eeveepaw looked away. "Twitch, you know we're the first apprentices RobinClan has ever had. Someday, cats will look back and tell stories about us." The brown apprentice paused, his violet eyes fixed on the sky above. "Don't you want to be somecat special?"

"Honestly, I just wanted somewhere safe to live," Twitchpaw confessed. "I never thought about it that way." But Eeveepaw had been just as eager to be respected as when she had first met him, hadn't he? "Though I guess I understand."

"Thank you," Eeveepaw butted his shoulder against hers, purring softly. "I can always count on you." He started padding towards the apprentices' birch, and Twitchpaw strode alongside him. Her friend had shorter legs than her, and she was so used to having to catch up with Trailblaze that she had to purposely slow her steps down for him. Was that maybe how Alderwing felt?

An idea struck her. Maybe, she could help him catch up.

"Do you want to train together?" she suggested. "Like, outside of training sessions. I can't help in battle moves...but I can show you some things Trailblaze taught me, and we can hunt together, stuff like that."

Eeveepaw's violet eyes widened as a slow smile appeared over his muzzle. "That would be great," he agreed. He bounced on the birch branch, a habit Twitchpaw recognised as excitement.

She purred, leaning into him. His brown fur was soft and warm against hers through the cold wind that whistled through the forest. A surge of hope lighted inside her. *Maybe we'll both get so good at our skills that it won't matter that I can't fight.*

Chapter 11

"Here are some juniper berries for your bellyache," Skylark mewed to Vixenpool. "I think you just haven't eaten well in a while."

Should I say anything else? What's a friendly thing to say? Ever since their visit to MarshClan, she had decided to start treating cats like Claystar and Scruffyheart and Splashpaw did. But great WishClan, it was difficult. She glanced back at Splashpaw, who was busy sorting out their freshly gathered herbs, his tail swishing happily. *What would he say?* "Oh, and I hope it gets better soon," she added hastily.

Hmm. Not quite Splashpaw, but it was a start.

"Thank you," the deputy meowed before lapping up the berries. "I'm so worried—I've been sending out more patrols but the Clan is hungry, and Alderwing isn't doing great, and they're all counting on me to settle their problems..."

That wasn't a surprise; leaf bare had just started, and the prey was starting to hide in their burrows and nests. Even Puddlesoar, the Clan's greatest hunter, didn't have much luck. Skylark's stomach rumbled at the thought of food.

"We can try eating berries instead," Skylark told her. "Splashpaw and I found a cranberry bush beside Badgerplace. They're still edible throughout leaf-bare, I think."

Vixenpool blinked at her with wide hazel eyes. "Wow! I never thought about berries being a source of food. Maybe I'll have to send the hunting patrols there sometime." She purred with amusement. "Speaking of which, I guess I'll do that now."

The lithe ginger deputy got up and padded to the edge of the ash tree, where she crossed over easily to the Great Tree. Skylark looked on after her; had she done it? Had she actually made conversation with someone? And Vixenpool had taken her suggestion, too.

That was pretty Splashpaw!

The sound of pawsteps grew closer as Splashpaw padded over to her, his pelt smelling of chervil. "I'll go check on the elders if that's alright," he mewed, with a tinge of excitement creeping into his cheerful voice.

Skylark nodded knowingly. "Go ahead." There was nothing the tortoiseshell tom loved more than to listen to Miloheart and Stormfall's stories. Splashpaw picked up a leaf wrap and trotted towards the elders' rowan tree, his tufted tail lifted high.

She decided to check if there was anything left in the prey hole from the previous day's hunting. As she padded towards the Great Tree, she heard the sound of two cats arguing and perked her ears up curiously.

"Why does MarshClan get to hunt on our land anyway?" Mistleswoop complained. "That's just raven-brained." The dark grey she-cat bristled, her spiky fur rising along her body as she faced Squishypelt.

Moosebloom gasped. "Without MarshClan, we wouldn't even *have* land," the former kittypet pointed out. Longing filled her dark blue gaze. "Though what I wouldn't give to be back in my Twolegs' warm nest...eating cream cheese and cat food..."

Squishypelt jumped in, narrowing his eyes at Mistleswoop. "WishClan will provide for us!"

"WishClan?" the three-legged she-cat huffed a laugh. "Don't tell me you actually *believe* that nonsense!"

Squishypelt puffed out his chest, the fur prickling around his back. "Why not? Claystar said they were real."

Mistleswoop stiffened. "That's delusional! And anyway, cats are greedy. They already have basically half our territory, soon they'll start hunting *all* over our territory." She shook her head, staring the other warrior down with vibrant green eyes. "Trust me."

"How can you say that about *MarshClan*, of all cats!" Moosebloom

countered.

Mistleswoop growled. "Don't think you know what you're talking about. You wouldn't have lasted a day where I came from, kittypet." The spotted-grey warrior backed away, looking shocked.

Puddlesoar padded up beside Mistleswoop, wrapping his tail around his mate's. "It doesn't matter if you believe in this organised cat religion or not," he meowed thoughtfully. "Although there definitely isn't evidence to back it up right now. But my mate is right about cats getting...aggressive, when prey levels are low."

"You can say greedy," Mistleswoop assured him.

Lichenpaw, who was busy fixing an unwoven nest with her mentor, jumped to her father's defense. "Splashpaw says WishClan is real, so I believe him!"

"What if they're not, and we're putting our faith in *nothing*??" Eggnogshine fretted. His ears were pressed flat into his fluffy head.

Skylark felt her fur prickle along her spine. Little did they know that their warrior ancestors had guided her through her entire career! "Are you all serious right now?" she blurted out. "WishClan is definitely real. All Clan cats believe in them!"

Her Clanmates looked shocked at the sound of her voice. Skylark rarely got involved in Clan matters. But how dare they deny the existence of the very cats who had led them to the Clans in the first place? She almost could sense Lynxbranch's ghostly presence by her side, urging her on.

"The very foundation of the Clan was built on WishClan," she quoted Avalanchefall. They had to know the truth! "Without them, all we are are cats arguing over scraps in the forest."

"Maybe that's all we need to be!" Mistleswoop shot back.

A retort formed on Skylark's tongue. What did they know, they had never been to a half-moon meeting or seen WishClan with their own eyes. They had never watched for signs in the clouds or had a spirit cat guide them when they were lost. But before she could say

anything, Vixenpool stepped forward. The surrounding cats fell quiet, wondering what the deputy would do. But the young ginger deputy just stood there, looking around and seeming lost.

Miloheart stepped by her side. "Everyone stop arguing," the chocolate elder meowed decisively. "Even if WishClan isn't real, who cares? We'll just do what we can. Now, who did you want on the patrol, Vix?"

Vixenpool blinked, scanning the Great Tree. "Um...Puddlesoar? You can pick who to go with you." She shot a glance at Skylark, then looked away quickly. "You can pick some berries by Badgerplace too, to make up for lost prey."

Mistleswoop hissed the words *lost prey* silently as Puddlesoar nodded. "That's a good idea, Vix. Squishypelt, Mistelswoop, Moosebloom." He pointed at each of them with his muzzle.

His mate looked more than a little put off with Squishypelt and Moosebloom in the patrol, but accepted it with a glance away.

Skylark ducked her head and strode back to the medicine tree, her pelt burning with frustration. What had she been thinking, trying to be all friendly with her Clanmates? She wasn't Splashpaw, Vixenpool, or Sparrowberry. She was just there to do her job.

And be the one with any real faith in WishClan.

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The half-moon that hung in the sky felt like a welcoming friend. A sign that she was finally going to be around those who understood her. Plus, the thought of being able to hear what WishClan had to say always made excitement run through Skylark's veins.

"Avalanchefall!" Skylark called out in delight at the familiar white coat. His eyes were the most brilliant shade of blue as they lit up. She pressed into him, purring in contentment.

"I missed you." Avalanchefall breathed.

Juniperivy watched with a smirk on her face. "Hey, Splashpaw." She

greeted the RobinClan apprentice, pretending not to notice her and Avalanchefall. Splashpaw mewed a cheery hello back to the CavernClan cat.

"Guys!" Hurricanepaw called. She and Scruffyheart approached the waterfall. Fireflies illuminated her face as they drew nearer, allowing Skylark to see the yellow she-cat's relieved expression. "Thank you *so* much for the catmint. We won't have to worry about greencough anymore!"

Splashpaw's ice-blue eyes glowed. "Has everyone recovered?"

"Mostly. A few cats still have whitecough, but not nearly as serious."

Scruffyheart strode towards the Starspray, purring a greeting to Avalanchefall and her. "I trust that both your Clans are doing well?"

Avalanchefall nodded. "Everyone's super excited for Snow Day." He turned to Skylark. "It's a day of first snow in our Clan. We compete in some events, and the winners are crowned Leaf-bare champions. Really fun! You should come watch!"

Skylark's eyes widened. "I can *do* that?"

Avalanchefall shrugged. "I guess? No cat cares about borders that day anyway." The white tom purred with eagerness. " I can't wait to beat Icedawn into the ground!!"

Scruffyheart whacked his fluffy grey tail into Avalanchefall's head. "What are you talking about? Borders are important *every day* of the year!"

As Skylark purred, she wondered why she had no problem being around the other medicine cats, as opposed to her Clanmates. Sometimes it almost felt like the medicine cats were their own small Clan. She supposed it was because they all had something in common; they had the same roles in their Clans, and their connecting points to WishClan.

As the medicine cats stood under the waterfall, Skylark saw the dazzling starburst behind her eyelids as the world disappeared around her. Her paws were no longer immersed in water, but warm

and tingly, as if she was inside a star.

"Hello again, Skylark." Lynxbranch stepped forward as the medicine cat opened her eyes. The spirit cat's silver smoke coat glowed purple. Skylark noticed every cat had different colours emitting from their fur and wondered briefly what it meant.

"It's nice to see you," Skylark meowed respectfully.

Lynxbranch purred. "And you," she meowed back. "It seems like there's some conflict in RobinClan?"

Skylark thought back to the argument from earlier. "Yeah," she admitted.

"Well. It's the first time any Clan was made up of such diverse cats."

Skylark shifted her paws. "Everyone's worried about the prey levels as well. We're trying to incorporate berries into our diet. Is that going to work?"

Lynxbranch swished her tail from side to side thoughtfully. "Perhaps. WishClan cats can only see bits and pieces of the future, so I can't guarantee anything. But this is just one leaf-bare, out of the many more that you will have. As long as your Clanmates take care of each other, you are strong enough to survive."

Suddenly, Skylark was in a bright forest. *RobinClan territory!* There were beautiful flowers that bloomed from the trees, each catching Skylark's eyes as if calling her name. At the center of the vision was RobinClan...Dustkit and Rainkit playing with Kiteheart, the warriors bringing back bountiful fresh prey. Her mouth watered at the sight.

The vision faded, and Lynxbranch was looking at her again. "Please be careful, though. There is a possibility that this future will not happen. Make sure to take care of your Clan."

"I already do." Hadn't she been healing them the whole time?

"Yes, you do physically," Lynxbranch agreed, spreading her lavender wings. "WishClan will guide your paws."

The amber sky faded and the turquoise grass disappeared from under her paws. The crash of the waterfall returned in full force. Skylark winced at the wetness that soaked her white-and-brown pelt. She shook her pelt out, joining the other medicine cats as they sprayed water everywhere back on dry land. Then it hit her, what Lynxbranch had meant. *I take care of them physically...* Skylark thought about how withdrawn she often was, watching for signs from WishClan and collecting plants by herself. *But I'm not always present physically, am I?*

"Avalanchefall?" Skylark padded to her friend's side. He glanced back at her with a familiar, sweet smile.

"Is it weird that I don't even feel like a RobinClan cat half the time?" Skylark admitted. "Not a lot of cats believe in WishClan, but even if they did..." she trailed off, looking into the distance. "Well, WishClan says I have to care for them, but how can I do that if I don't even feel like one of them?"

Avalanchefall tilted his head. "You're a naturally charming cat, Skylark. Just walk up to them and hit them with it. You'll be part of the Clan in no time!"

Juniperivy flicked her tail, rolling her eyes at Avalanchefall. "I don't know why you open your mouth sometimes." She blinked at Skylark with kind golden eyes, her gaze warm and comforting. "Apologies for eavesdropping, but many cats feel like that—even non-medicine cats."

Really? Skylark wondered who in her Clan might feel like her. A memory drifted to the front of her mind, of Twitchpaw walking dejectedly in the forest after training. Hadn't the apprentice said something about finding it hard to be a warrior?

Juniperberry pointed to the MarshClan apprentice with her muzzle. "Hurricanepaw has the most vivid visions out of all of us," she explained quietly. "It can be hard for her sometimes."

Skylark glanced back at the golden-pelted she-cat, who was chatting with Scruffyheart about her dream. "I had no idea."

"Exactly," Juniperivy agreed. "Sometimes the best thing you can do to care for your Clanmates is just try to understand them."

The thought of trying to understand cats like Mistleswoop was beyond Skylark. But maybe she could start small; with cats she already knew, like Splashpaw. Maybe even cats like Twitchpaw; she was Splashpaw's friend after all.

"Thank you," Skylark whispered, her heart lifting. "I think you might be right."

Chapter 12

Snow drifted softly around Twitchpaw in the early dawn air as she and Lichenpaw pulled a squirrel toward the nursery. Splashpaw was out on an early herb-gathering patrol, while Eeveepaw and Tricklepaw were still dozing in the apprentices' birch. Tricklepaw hadn't even been in his nest when Twitchpaw climbed into hers for the night, but she was used to that now.

Twitchpaw stretched her sore muscles. She and Eeveepaw had gone on more hunting patrols together the past few days, and the double dose of training was starting to tire her out. But at least her friend did seem happier, even though their catches had gotten more and more sparse.

"I'm going to send a patrol to MarshClan," Sparkstar was meowing to Vix. "Trailblaze, can you and Twitchpaw head over? You can pick who you want to go with you. I want to send a slightly earlier patrol so we're guaranteed to meet them."

Twitchpaw's ears perked at her name. She and Lichenpaw let the squirrel drape onto the low branch of the nursery willow. The dark ginger-and-brown apprentice bent down as she got a good look down at the cosy shelter on the grass, whiskers twitching with pleasure. The nursery was the only place with a lower den in addition to nests in the treetops, so the kits would sleep safely. It was Lichenpaw's first project, and she and Eggnogshine had worked very hard on making it safe for both Chasecloud and her new kits.

"Is that *squirrel*?" Chasecloud licked her lips, eyes shining as she peeked out from her nest. "Thank you!! Dusty and Rainy are hungry." She purred fondly down at the young brown-and-white she-kit and her dappled grey brother.

Dustkit lunged towards the squirrel, licking her lips. Twitchpaw noticed with dismay that the colourpoint cat was already thinner than when she had last seen her.

"You're getting enough prey, right? And the shelter's okay?" The torbie apprentice shifted her paws uncertainly. In response, Chasecloud nodded vigorously. "Oh yes! You did a good job, Lichenpaw," she purred when the apprentice didn't seem convinced.

Twitchpaw nodded lightly towards her branchmate in agreement. Then she dipped her head to them both and headed out of the den, still wondering what the patrol Sparkstar mentioned was about.

"What's the matter?" she asked her mentor as she saw him heading toward her from the centre of the Great Tree.

"Don't freak out, but there's been MarshClan scent past Bigroots," Trailblaze explained, turning to her with eyebrows raised. "They claim it was just a silly apprentice mistake, but it seems pretty suspicious to me."

This caught Twitchpaw off guard."Why would they do that?" After having the whole run of half their territory to hunt on, did they *really* need more?

"There's probably no reason to worry, Twitchpaw," Trailblaze soothed. "We just want to make sure. Want to come with?"

Twitchpaw hesitated. The MarshClan border was near Badgerplace...and her plan to avoid borders still sounded good. But she could hardly say no to the cat who had agreed to avoid battle training for her. "Okay," she decided hesitantly.

"Good, because it's probably good to visit the other Clans for your training." Trailblaze waved his tail and Twitchpaw followed him over to where Crowpelt and Sparrowberry were standing.

Crowpelt's gaze dropped when he saw them, but he simply flicked his tail at Trailblaze. "We're going, then?"

"Of course! It's nice to patrol with you again after so long," Trailblaze purred back to the defender.

"Only because you forgot to come with us last time." Crowpelt's words sounded harsh to Twitchpaw, but his grey eyes were lighthearted. She looked away guiltily. Trailblaze had probably only

missed the patrol since he was busy training her.

Her mentor licked his chest in embarrassment. "Well...we don't talk about that."

Twitchpaw caught sight of Eeveepaw heading out to train with Alderwing. "Let's go to the training tree," the calico mewed.

Eeveepaw shared a glance with Twitchpaw. That was where the two had trained themselves yesterday, practising their jumps for the Leap of Faith. The brown apprentice turned back to his mentor with a smile. "Okay!"

Surprise at the lack of snarky comments glimmered in his mentor's pale green eyes. Alderwing responded with a dip of her head as they climbed towards the training tree.

Have fun. Twitchpaw hoped that the extra training her and Eeveepaw had done helped him see that he wasn't as behind as he thought.

Once all the cats were gathered, the patrol set off, nimbly weaving through the branches toward the ground. As they walked in Bigroots' direction, Twitchpaw caught a whiff of stale MarshClan scent. It was probably the apprentice Trailblaze had mentioned; but it still put her on guard. As they padded through the undergrowth, the forest scents in the air shifted to a muddier tang. The MarshClan border marker was still fresh, but Twitchpaw could tell no cats had been here that day yet.

"The dawn patrol isn't here yet," Crowpelt echoed her thoughts while sniffing the air.

"Let's try a bit farther in!" Trailblaze suggested. He was already on the edge of the border with his front paw hanging over the reeds. Sparrowberry rushed forward to stop him, nudging him pointedly with a flick of her tail.

Clan cats protective. Oak not leader, Sparrowberry signed.

That was true, but from what Twitchpaw could tell, Clayrain seemed like an okay cat. He had helped them settle into the forest

and hadn't caused any trouble. She glanced around furtively, hoping they would meet a nice patrol.

"I can go in," Trailblaze offered. "Who wants to come with me?"

Crowpelt looked like he was going to offer, but Sparrowberry had already sprung to the warrior's side. Twitchpaw couldn't help feeling bad for the dark-furred tom as a shadow cast over his stormy grey eyes.

"Do you want to come, Twitchpaw?" Trailblaze asked her.

Twittchpaw looked from him to Crowpelt, who was staring at Trailblaze like he was waiting for his friend to ask him too. She shook her head quickly. Not only did she hate the idea of stepping into another Clan's border when she wasn't supposed to, but she still felt bad for Crowpelt. How much worse would it be if he was alone? Trailblaze nodded and twined his tail with Sparowberry's happily. "Okay, you two keep watch. Tell the Clan if we're not back soon!" With that, the two warriors padded together over the MarshClan border.

Twitchpaw watched Crowpelt out of the corner of her eye. The defender was staring—or rather, glaring at the ground. She shifted uncomfortably. Should she say something, or was he mad at her?

A few awkward seconds passed. Twitchpaw could feel every one of them beneath her skin. "So...what do you think about the scents?" she meowed, breaking the silence.

The black defender flicked his tail, looking surprised that Twitchpaw was talking to him. "I don't know. Are Trailblaze and Sparrowberry mates, by the way?" His voice was strained, as he stared back where the warriors had disappeared into the marshes.

Twitchpaw blinked. "Yeah. Did he...not tell you?"

Crowpelt sighed. "Figures." He drew a claw through the ground, leaving a scratch mark in the bare dirt. "No wonder he's always so busy. He doesn't need me, now that he's found someone new."

So he's not mad at me. The hurt that laced his voice made

Twitchpaw's heart ache as she remembered that they, along with Laurelcall, had all joined the Clan together. "You were friends for a long time, right?"

Crowpelt's grey eyes fixed on the ground. "He saved me when I was a kit, and the three of us lived together for as long as I can remember."

Twitchpaw moved closer to the defender, just the length of a fox-tail. "I swear I'm losing all my friends to she-cats," Crowpelt continued. "First Laurelcall moons over Flashflood, and now Trailblaze is always off with Sparrowberry!" His tone was joking, but Twitchpaw could sense the hurt underneath.

What if Eeveepaw ran off one day frolicking with a cat he liked, and didn't spend as much time with her anymore? *That would really hurt,* Twitchpaw thought. "I'm sure they still care about you," she tried to assure him. "Even if they have mates, you're still just as much their family."

Crowpelt flicked his tail thoughtfully. "I guess. I hope so."

Just then, the muddy scent of a MarshClan patrol grew stronger as they appeared at the corner of Twitchpaw's eye. Trailblaze and Sparrowberry were with them, her mentor looking proud for finding them. But Twitchpaw noticed the patrol's eyes were narrowed with suspicion. A sleek brown tom with dark green eyes widened his stance at them. "You're awfully close to the border," he hissed softly.

A jolt of fear ran through the grey she-cat's fur. Soft voices could be just as menacing as harsh growls. *I'm intruding. It's my fault. I need to go.* The familiar, irrational thoughts stabbed at Twitchpaw as she took anxious steps backwards. *If they attack, I can always hide.* The thought calmed her somewhat. She glanced at Trailblaze, who had his tail upright. *Wait.* And then he swished it in the signal he'd taught her, a concerned question.

Twitchpaw nodded shakily as she crouched behind Crowpelt.

"I told you, we want to talk to Claystar," Trailblaze mewed.

The MarshClan cats looked uncertainly at each other. Then the brown tom dipped his head. "Very well. Hivecloud, bring Claystar over." He stared at the RobinClan cats intensely. "Stay on your side of the border, please."

The light brown tabby with periwinkle eyes turned and splashed through the marsh with no hesitation. A while later he returned with a familiar dark ginger tom by his side, his pelt almost the colour of juniper berries. Claystar's gaze softened when he saw the RobinClan cats but his tail remained bushed cautiously. "What's the matter?"

Sparrowberry dipped her head to the other leader. *How can she be so calm?* This wasn't Oakstar, after all. *Hunt past Bigroots?* she signed with Trailblaze translating. *Clan hungry. Hunt your own land.*

Claystar frowned. "We had an agreement. It's leaf-bare, so we are allowed to hunt on your territory up till Bigroots."

"And you're certain you're not going *past*?" Trailblaze questioned. "Is your territory not enough to sustain your Clan?"

Oh no, don't say that! Twitchpaw cringed for her mentor as the MarshClan cat narrowed his eyes. Claystar's fur seemed to rise along his back, but he quickly smoothed it down with a deep breath. "Look. Your *land* has been no-cat's land for seasons and seasons!" He gave a tired smile. "Don't make an enemy out of us, RobinClan. Haven't we given you enough by letting you stay in the forest?"

Sparrowberry swished her tail. *If this doesn't work out, we may have to rethink our arrangement.*

"Great WishClan," Twitchpaw heard one of the MarshClan cats mumble under their breath. "Soon they'll be driving *us* out of the forest."

Claystar dipped his head. "We will take what we need to survive," he meowed simply. "I know Oakstar cared for you, but my Clan will always come first." With a flick of his tail, the MarshClan patrol marked their side of the border and padded away.

Once they were gone, Trailblaze let out a growl. "Are they serious? RobinClan needs to feed our cats too!"

Twitchpaw's heart was still pumping fast in her chest as she watched the patrol disappear. Part of her had been so sure that at some point the MarshClan patrol would tear them to shreds. But had Claystar been hinting that there wasn't going to be enough for his Clan after all?

Sparrowberry shook her head, gently brushing his tail over the warrior's back. *We tried.* But Twitchpaw wondered if all they had done was make it worse, make Claystar think they were *more* annoying, *more* worthy of stealing prey from. Was that how all the other Clans saw them; as *rogues* instead of true Clan cats? Yet both groups were trained to hunt and fight each other to the death for survival. Twitchpaw shivered. Was that what being a warrior truly meant?

Was that her destiny?

Crowpelt turned away, pointedly avoiding Trailblaze's gaze. "Let's get on with the rest of the patrol already."

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When Twitchpaw and her patrol got back to camp, Twitchpaw noticed Lichenpaw, Splashpaw, Eeveepaw and Tricklepaw resting on Hightree together. It was the tallest tree in camp, with only a few branches to climb up. *Splashpaw! I haven't talked to him in a while.* The medicine cat apprentice was often off with Skylark, too busy training or caring for their Clanmates to share prey with them. Eeveepaw grinned at her as she hauled herself up the tall trunk of the largely branchless tree. "Heya Twitchpaw! How was patrol?"

Twitchpaw shrugged, curling up next to the brown apprentice.

"Puddlesoar was worried," Splashpaw meowed.

Lichenpaw slid out her claws. "We'll have to defend against MarshClan if necessary."

"Yeah, Kestrelflame said the best defence is being tough,"

Tricklepaw added. "That's why I'm training to be tough! See, I can growl so menacingly now." He demonstrated, and though it was nowhere near Kestrelflame's growls, Twitchpaw was surprised at the deep sound that came out of the young tom.

If even Tricklepaw was thinking like that, how long would it take for her to become as bloodthirsty as...*them?* The shadows flashed in her mind, as she leaned closer into Eeveepaw's fur.

Eeveepaw rolled his eyes at the ginger apprentice. "Being tough isn't the most important thing in the world."

At that, Tricklepaw gave him a death glare. "Maybe it's not to you and Alderwing!"

Splashpaw gave Tricklepaw a calming lick on his ear as Eeveepaw let out a low hiss. "I wouldn't want to go against Scruffyheart or Hurricanepaw either," the medicine cat apprentice meowed thoughtfully.

Lichenpaw rolled her eyes. "Isn't it against the warrior code to be friends with other Clan cats?" she pointed out.

"Medicine cats have their *own* code," her brother meowed proudly.

The defender apprentice widened her green eyes at him. "I didn't know that. What *is* your code?"

Splashpaw opened his mouth to tell her, then shut it again. "You're not a medicine cat!" he teased. "Why do you want to know?"

"Sharing skills is important!" Lichenpaw argued. "Don't you remember how we survived the flood?"

While the siblings bickered, Twitchpaw turned to Eeveepaw. "How was training with Alderwing?" she whispered, looking at him closely.

Eeveepaw shrugged. "Same as always. We did hunting, but the *boring* kind where I learned the stuff I *already know* and Alderwing spent the whole lesson correcting me and stuff." He sighed. "How does she always manage to make the most fun things so boring? At

least we can train together later." He brightened up at the thought.

Twitchpaw nodded, thinking of the tail signals she could teach her friend. "Yeah. But maybe Alderwing is just trying to make sure you have a good foundation?"

"But I want to go faster. I want to become a warrior, and I want to be feared!!" Eeveepaw leaped to his paws as the branch below him wobbled. "Like her sister Flashflood. She's *so* much cooler and stronger and braver than Alderwing; shame she's not a warrior though."

"But Alderwing has her strengths too." Twitchpaw wondered what it must be like, constantly being compared to a littermate who looked exactly like you. Was that part of the reason the calico took her duties so seriously? "It seems like maybe she's trying to make you a good warrior too, Eeveepaw. She might just have a different way of going about it."

Eeveepaw went still as he processed her words. "Yeah, well, I guess so," he agreed finally. "I guess I just have way more fun training with you."

"Aww." Twitchpaw brushed her grey pelt against his, feeling her heart warm at his words. Her friend might be a huge prankster, and an ambitious cat, but he could be really sweet at times. "Same, you mouse-brain."

Meanwhile, Splashpaw and Lichenpaw had stopped their conversation. Splashpaw got up, his dilute tortoiseshell markings rippling along his body as he stretched. "See you guys later. I have to check on Chasecloud and her kits real quick."

"Can I come?" Lichenpaw mewed sheepishly, shifting her paws. *Wow, Lichenpaw really likes learning everything she can,* Twitchpaw thought. Splashpaw shrugged. "If you want. Come on, we can play with Dustkit and Rainkit when we get there!" With a purr, the medicine cat apprentice and his sister climbed down Sunningtree carefully.

Eeveepaw turned back to Twitchpaw, his violet eyes filled with

worry, his playful facade diminishing with the others gone. "I think today was hard for both of us. Alderwing and I barely caught anything on our hunt," he admitted quietly.

Snow started to fall all around them, drifting through the forest trees and onto branches. The white snowflakes were beautiful, the crisp air cool and fresh. But Twitchpaw couldn't relax when she heard Eeveepaw's words.

If MarshClan was as desperate as prey as RobinClan was starting to be, Twitchpaw had a feeling that things were going to get much worse.

Chapter 13

The dark, misty space was one that Skylark had grown used to. A thrill of excitement ran through her. Even when her belly ached from the lack of prey when she was awake, getting to see the Darkspirit in her sleep was definitely a welcome treat.

"I've been waiting," the spirit cat meowed in what might have been a rumbly purr, it was hard to tell from his rumbly, distorted voice. "Gets a bit lonely being a ghost, not being able to interact with the living at all."

"Then...aren't you ready to go to WishClan?" Skylark questioned, watching the dark shape move around like a semi-solid cat. What could be holding the cat back?

The Darkspirit dipped his head. "I can show you."

Another vision! Skylark watched in anticipation as the dark purple atmosphere turned lighter, less heavy. Daylight streamed in, lighting her fur up but seemingly having no effect on the Darkspirit at all. She blinked, her sight clearing as grass appeared under her paws.

The spirit cat went silent, watching.

Not enough. Leaves were strewn everywhere, as the cat in the vision pressed his paws worriedly to the earth. A sensation radiated from them; guilt and loss of some sort.

And then the scene shifted. A flash went off, and claws attacked the cat. The cat twisted in shock, trying to pull away, but the attacker showed no mercy. They pinned him to the ground, their face blurred and unrecognisable as they unsheathed their claws.

With one painful gash, the vision went blurry and the scene plunged into darkness once more.

Skylark backed away in surprise. She hadn't known what she was expecting, but this certainly wasn't it. "W-was that you?" she whispered. The details had been vague, but she could now understand what the Darkspirit meant. If a cat brutally attacked *her* out of nowhere, would she have the peace she needed to go to WishClan straight away?

"Yes." The shadowed cat's echoing voice somehow dropped to an even darker tone. "I don't remember who, by the way. I just know that it led me to your territory somehow. That's why I hang around here."

Skylark nodded, taking it all in. Lead to RobinClan territory? But the Clan had just been formed a few moons ago. *Maybe something happened back when this was no-cat's land.* She took a pace forward towards the spirit cat. "I'm sorry..." she murmured. That was what she was supposed to say, right? "I hope you figure it out soon. You have cats waiting for you in WishClan."

The Darkspirit slunk around the dark space, head covered in shadows. "I know."

The world was getting brighter again, the darkness melting into softer tones. *Another vision?* But Skylark realised that even the Darkspirit was getting fainter. *I'm waking up!* The medicine cat thought she heard one last thing from him before the darkness completely melted away.

"Be careful. I'll see you soon."

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"Skylark. Skylark. SKYLARK." The medicine cat opened her eyes to find Splashpaw standing by her nest, paws shaking the woven twigs. His ice-blue eyes shone with apology as she blinked up at him. "Sparkstar and Vixenpool want to talk to us at the leader's oak."

The dawn light was streaming through the branches. Skylark stretched in her nest. Splashpaw had always been an early riser. His fur smelled of fresh herbs; had he been checking up on the warriors

before patrols started? *I was doing important stuff too!* Skylark thought, though her fur prickled with self-consciousness. "I'll be there soon," she promised.

Splashpaw nodded, a slight smile curling his muzzle. "I gave Tricklepaw some comfrey root for his wrenched claw, by the way. Silly guy was too tough. Whatever that means!"

Skylark dipped her head gratefully to him as she grasped her tongue over her patched white fur. She was glad that her apprentice was so enthusiastic about training. Since she had only trained for a half-moon or so with Avalanchefall, Splashpaw had caught up fast. She now trusted him with most of the camp duties, which he seemed happy to do.

"Tell him to take the day off," Skylark suggested. "He can be excused from patrols today."

Splashpaw snorted. "Tricklepaw? Day off? And hedgehogs fly!" He collapsed into a purr, and Skylark felt laughter build up in her too as her apprentice padded off. It was hard to resist the good-natured young tom.

What could the leader and deputy want to talk about? Skylark felt her belly rumbling and decided to check the fresh-kill hole. The white-and-brown she-cat padded over to the Great Tree and looked inside the hole in the trunk.

To her dismay, there were only a couple of birds and half a squirrel inside. She supposed it was expected, being leaf-bare, but still. Was there enough there for every cat? Skylark hesitated.

I would have grabbed it without hesitation if I was still at Twolegplace.

For a second she paused, staring at the dismal amount of prey. Her belly growled again, reminding her of how hungry she was. *Just take it,* her brain snarled. *You need it; you deserve it!*

But just as she reached out her muzzle to take the squirrel, she spotted Miloheart padding towards her direction. She turned her head towards him and caught sight of Vixenpool trotting alongside,

purring.

"There isn't much left," the ginger deputy meowed to the elder. "But there's a sparrow I know you'd love!"

The brown tom chuckled. "Look at you, taking care of *me* now." Fondness edged his meow as they padded across the Great Tree together.

"Elders and kits should be fed first," Vixenpool meowed with a twinkle in her hazel eyes. "And we wouldn't want to break the warrior code, now would we?"

Skylark backed away as a voice whispered in her mind. *Take care of your Clan.* Maybe that was what Lynxbranch had meant after all.

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"So," Sparkstar meowed as Skylark settled down beside Splashpaw on the leader's oak. Skylark looked around, realising for the first time how big the tree was. *And Sparkstar has this all to himself?* Skylark imagined herself in his place, spending nights without Splashpaw there to share her duties or just talk to each other. *Does he get lonely?*

"Leaf-bare has arrived, and it is getting harder to find prey. Especially since MarshClan basically shares half our territory at this point." The black and white tom flicked his tail at Skylark and Splashpaw. "Do either of you have any input? Signs from WishClan, perhaps?"

Splashpaw shook his head. Skylark nodded, hesitating. *Should I tell them what Lynxbranch showed me?* Recalling the argument among her Clanmates before, a wry thought came to her mind. *Will they even believe me?* But Vixenpool gave her a warm smile, so she took a deep breath. "We have to do whatever it takes to take care of RobinClan," she advised. "And to make sure the Clan is united so we can survive our first leaf-bare. But I have seen a vision, and I think things might turn out alright if we do."

Sparkstar paused, green eyes fixed on her as he processed the

words. "Did Oakstar tell you that?"

"No, another WishClan cat called Lynxbranch." Skylark thought back to when she had last talked with the old MarshClan leader. "Oakstar said to tell you that he's watching over us, by the way."

Sparkstar dipped his head, eyes shadowed with emotion. "That is a great comfort," he mewed at last. "Thank you, Skylark."

Skylark licked her chest fur, not knowing what to say. But warmth rose in her heart; warmth that she had only ever remembered feeling around Avalanchefall. It sprung up in her heart like a fresh well of water as a low purr rumbled in her chest.

Splashpaw lifted his muzzle. "Is it really fair that MarshClan can hunt on our land? Can we ask them to stop or something?"

Sparkstar sighed. "It was the agreement we made with the other leaders when we first came to the forest. I didn't realise how hard it would be to work at the time...I suppose I was just relieved to settle down somewhere away from Twolegs."

"The patrol we sent didn't seem to work," Vixenpool added. "I don't understand why."

"In Mistleswoop's words, cats are greedy." Splashpaw glanced up at Skylark. "Do you think...we need to attack?"

"No way!" Vixenpool shifted her white paws uncomfortably.

Skylark thought about it. Had Lynxbranch implied they attack? She wasn't sure. "WishClan was a bit vague," she admitted. "But I know they'll guide our paws."

Sparkstar dipped his head. "We'll mark our borders a little more strongly to let MarshClan know we're still here. But if the prey continues to not be enough for everyone..." The leader blinked decisively. "We may have to resort to cutting them off from all our land. Even if it means a fight."

We must defend our home. Skylark was alarmed at the thought; she had never felt this strongly about a piece of land before.

"It's weird," Vixenpool echoed her thoughts as they padded out of the shelter of the leader's oak. "Miloheart and I were threatened by other cats before, but we always just moved location."

Skylark nodded. "But now we have a whole Clan to protect."

Vixenpool kneaded the wood below her. "So many cats are counting on us." Her gaze flickered to Chasecloud, Kiteheart, and their kits nearby. "I'm glad I have cats to help me." Her gaze landed on Alderwing, who was lying in the sun with her sister Flashflood.

Skylark nodded, a sense of appreciation to her dilute tortoiseshell apprentice rising in her.

Vixenpool meowed a goodbye to Skylark as she padded away. Skylark crossed the branches towards her apprentice, feeling curious as she recalled the meeting. *If Splashpaw didn't see the same vision as me at the Starspray, what* did *he see?* But she froze when she saw him with Lichenpaw.

Better leave him to spend time with his littermate. Skylark started to turn away, pelt prickling self-consciously along her back.

"You talked to the *leader* and *deputy*?" Lichenpaw's voice was awestruck, though envy crept into her words. Skylark paused and glanced back towards them. "Wha-how? What about?"

Splashpaw purred. "Oh, just the prey shortage stuff."

The dark ginger and brown torbie frowned in confusion. "Wait, I thought medicine cats were only in charge of herbs. Aren't us defenders the ones in charge of sorting prey and making sure every cat has enough?"

"Well...maybe," her brother shrugged. "But medicine cats can talk to WishClan!" He purred contentedly as he rubbed against her fur. "Now we're both such important parts of the Clan, like you always wanted."

Skylark couldn't be sure, but she thought that Lichenpaw's expression wasn't as joyous as her brother seemed to be.

Chapter 14

Twitchpaw padded alongside her mentor, the snow soft on the branches and freezing against her paws. Sparrowberry and Eggnogshine were trailing behind slightly. More patrols had been sent to hunt in the treetops lately since MarshClan cats had no access to them, and even defenders had occasionally been sent on hunting patrols.

She opened her mouth to taste the cold air. There was a finch to her left, maybe she could catch it. Twitchpaw crouched, trying to keep her balance as the branch wobbled beneath her. The finch was right there with its fluffed-up feathers against the cold. When she got close enough she pounced. But the bird was quick, chirping in alarm as it flew away.

Fox-dung! Twitchpaw sighed. That was one thing about birds and squirrels—they were *fast*.

She turned back to the patrol and saw Eggnogshine with his ears pulled back as he looked below them. "So Flashflood wasn't kidding," the golden tom whispered in disbelief.

Twitchpaw followed his gaze—and immediately froze in shock. A patrol of unfamiliar cats was hunting in their territory with a pile of prey gathered in the centre. Twitchpaw's mouth watered looking at it. It wasn't that much more than what they had caught, but right then, any and all prey looked delicious.

She flicked her tail, her heart thudding. The patrol to MarshClan was still on her mind. *What if we have to move again?* But Twitchpaw had grown so used to the forest, and she loved training alongside the other apprentices. *What if we have to...fight MarshClan?* She rubbed the scar on her hind leg subconsciously, panic flooding through her once more.

"Twitchpaw?" Trailblaze frowned at her, looking concerned. "Sorry, I know it can be hard to focus during patrols. Do you want to take a

break?"

She blinked, gazing up at her mentor, signalling with her tail. *Enemy sighted.*

Trailblaze looked down warily. "Yeah..." He broke off, gazing towards Sparrowberry. "It's pretty hard to watch." The ginger and white tom rubbed his ginger paws together as he watched a grey-speckled she-cat leap at a shrew down in Bigroots.

Sparrowberry waved her tail. *No care them.* The rust-coloured warrior brushed her fur past Trailblaze's briefly, though even the level-headed she-cat looked apprehensive at the MarshClan cats below.

So that's why we're having an even harder time catching prey. Twitchpaw shivered as she hauled herself up the Great Tree beside Eggnogshine with their catches.

MarshClan was as desperate as them. They wouldn't go down without a fight.

"Twitchpaw," Crowpelt greeted her. The defender was seated on a high branch on the Great Tree as the camp guard, grey eyes scanning the forest. "Do you know where Trailblaze is?"

Twitchpaw glanced up at him, barely registering his words. She shook her head at him apologetically. "I...he was right behind me, I think..."

"Trailblaze!" the defender mewed indignantly as her mentor looked up, startled, as he padded up to camp beside Sparrowberry. "I thought you were coming on border patrol with us."

Trailblaze's eyes flew wide open. "Oh...fox-dung. I'm sorry, Crow, I completely forgot about that..."

Crowpelt flicked his tail irritably. "More like you went frolicking about with your girlfriend instead?"

Trailblaze and Sparrowberry stared at each other, before Trailblaze pulled away, pelt heating up. Crowpelt huffed and turned away

before he could say anything.

Should I say something? Twitchpaw glanced at Crowpelt, who was pointedly ignoring Trailblaze, and then her mentor, who was looking as if he had gotten stung. She could only think to sign the check-in signal, unsure what to do.

Trailblaze only gave her the slightest shrug before padding away beside his mate.

Twitchpaw paced along the branches of camp, unsure what to do. It felt like butterflies were swarming in her stomach, clouding her thoughts and fluttering in her throat. Finally, her gaze fell on the medicine ash. *Maybe Splashpaw will be there,* she figured as she padded towards it.

But he wasn't. As the bare ash branches brushed Twitchpaw's fur, she only saw Skylark organising herbs. Twitchpaw's pelt prickled as she stepped back hesitantly, but Skylark took notice of her.

"Hey Twitchpaw," the medicine cat greeted her, looking at her up and down as if scanning for injuries. "Do you need any help?"

"Yeah, I..." Twitchpaw sucked in a breath, fixing her gaze on Splashpaw's empty nest instead of Skylark. "A lot's going on, and I guess I'm stressed."

To Twitchpaw's surprise, Skylark sighed. "Yes. The whole MarshClan thing is escalating quickly, I'm afraid."

Twitchpaw shivered, her breath catching in her throat. "Will there be a battle?" She blinked up at the medicine cat, willing her to say otherwise.

"There...might be," Skylark answered slowly. The brown-patched she-cat seemed to hesitate as she broke into silence before pulling out a few leaves and red berries. She pushed them in front of Twitchpaw. "Juniper berries and chamomile leaves."

Twitchpaw tilted her head doubtfully at the herbs. But as she lapped them up, she breathed a freeing sigh of relief. Her throat unclenched, and her mind seemed to clear. The heaviness in her

brain lightened a little, shadows tucking themselves away for later. "Wow," Twitchpaw whispered. "I didn't even know there were even herbs for this."

Skylark gave her a surprised look. "There are herbs for lots of things."

"Is there one to stop cats from fighting?" Twitchpaw perked up hopefully.

Skylark gave a short purr. "I'm a doctor, not a magician, Twitchpaw." She flicked her tail and stared up beyond the branches of the ash tree. "I hate to say it, but I'm not sure even WishClan can stop this."

Twitchpaw was shocked. The medicine cat's faith in their warrior ancestors had never wavered, even when no other cat was truly sure they existed.

Stars, we're done for.

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"Hey, did Skylark teach you that move, Splashpaw?" Twitchpaw barely noticed when the conversation had shifted. They were all curled on on Sunningtree again. It was the warmest place in the camp, being the closest to the sun, but chills still ran through Twitchpaw's grey fur when she was there. Luckily the defenders had placed lots of moss, leaves, and feathers on the branches that warmed it up significantly.

Apparently the other apprentices, even Splashpaw, had started practising defence moves together while she was out hunting. "I know *I* didn't show you that," Lichenpaw continued. "I'm so happy you finally got to train with us, though!"

Splashpaw ducked his head to bite at his hummingbird. "No, it wasn't her. When Skylark and I took catmint to MarshClan, Willowpaw and Tanglepaw showed me some moves."

"Oh, them?" Eeveepaw let out a soft growl. Twitchpaw remembered the way Tanglepaw had talked to them during the Gathering. As if

RobinClan was just another group of rogues.

The medicine cat apprentice gave a puzzled look. "They were nice to me."

Lichenpaw raised her head. Her gaze was wide with disbelief as she looked at her brother. "That's where you went that day...you took herbs to MarshClan?"

"Yeah," Splashpaw mewed after a short pause. "And we *may* have helped treat all their cats."

Lichenpaw started purring a shocked, unbelieving laugh. "You gave our herbs to a rival Clan, when we should be saving up for leaf-bare."

"Yeah," Splashpaw nodded.

"Oh, *that's* probably why they were nice to you, Splashpaw," Eeveepaw mewed satisfactorily.

Lichenpaw was on her paws now, looking at Splashpaw as if she had never seen him in her life. "But the warrior code was one of the first things we learned when we joined the Clans! You may have friendships with cats from the other Clans, but your loyalty must remain to your Clan, as one day you may meet them in battle."

Splashpaw bristled. "I told you! Medicine cats have their own code."

Lichenpaw's green eyes were flickering with frustration. "Do all medicine cats think they're so special?" The patched ginger she-cat and her brother were both on their paws, their prey abandoned, hanging drooped between two branches. Even Tricklepaw's tough demeanour had momentarily fallen away as he watched speechlessly at his littermates. Twitchpaw had no idea what to do, and from the way Eeveepaw stood gaping at them, he didn't either. *Stop them!* Another part of Twitchpaw's mind hissed at her. *No, getting in the middle will just get you hurt!*

"Look," Splashpaw growled. It was the most menacing she had ever seen the dilute tortoiseshell tom. Twitchpaw's paws itched to slip into the nearest hiding spot, but she couldn't seem to move. "Maybe

sharing our skills was the only way to survive as loners. But we're in a Clan now, for WishClan's sake. We all live to protect each other."

"Exactly!" Lichenpaw stepped up until she was nose-to-nose with the medicine cat apprentice. "We *protect* each other, maybe not by giving all our herbs away before leaf-bare? And what if the sickness spreads and our Clanmates get it too? We already gave MarshClan so much of our land for hunting! Why give them our precious catmint as well?"

"You know *nothing* about what it's like to be a medicine cat!" Splashpaw snapped. "Skylark and I—we couldn't let the MarshClan medicine cats down, or their sick Clanmates!"

"Maybe I *would* if you'd tell me about it!" Lichenpaw shot back, her leaf-covered pelt ruffling. "We might have been the best RobinClan cats if we all contributed to each other's training, but you act like yours is some big secret!"

Splashpaw backed away, looking wounded. "You wouldn't understand."

"We've spent our whole lives together, Splashpaw!" Lichenpaw's expression was a flurry of betrayal and fear. "I'd understand *whatever* is important to you." She dropped her glaring green gaze for a second. "I thought...RobinClan was most important to you."

"Then why don't you understand *this*?" the medicine cat apprentice retorted, standing his ground. Suddenly Twitchpaw realised that Lichenpaw had Splashpaw on the edge of Sunningtree, but she didn't even think both of them noticed. The defender apprentice was staring at her brother with a heartbroken expression. The littermates who had once been so close were now both on the edge of the tall tree, facing off each other like they were enemies. Their words were bouncing around Sunningtree, pounding into Twitchpaw's head. *Please stop,* she cried silently. Someone was going to get hurt; she could sense it. Urgency pumped throughout her body, but she found she couldn't move, couldn't help anyone. All she could do was hide behind Eeveepaw and hope it was over soon.

Why am I so useless? Why can't I do anything?

They both stood dangerously close to the edges of the tree now. One step more and they'll fall, Twitchpaw realised with rising panic. *What do I do?*

But before Twitchpaw even knew what was happening, Lichenpaw had lashed a paw out at her brother. Eeveepaw took action, jumping in the middle of them. Surprised, the two cats backed away from each other. Lichenpaw stumbled towards Twitchpaw and Tricklepaw, but Splashpaw floundered the other way with less agility. His paws slipped off the edge of the branch as he stumbled back. A gasped breath was the only thing she heard before he disappeared over the edge.

Shock pulsed through Twitchpaw's body. A stunned look appeared on Lichenpaw's face, but Twitchpaw didn't really care. She raced to the edge, only to see the medicine cat apprentice hanging on a thin branch. She needed to help him. But before she could reach out a paw for him to grab on, the thin branch let out a loud creak and snapped. Terrified ice-blue eyes locked with hers as Splashpaw fell, still clinging to whatever was left of the snapped branch.

There was no time to breathe, think, or move. The whole argument seemed to leave Twitchpaw's mind in an instant, replaced by only terror. She only heard her heart thudding in her head as the medicine cat apprentice vanished below the leaves.

***

"*Splahpaw*!" the cry tore itself from Twitchpaw's throat.

"I'll get him!" Eeveepaw yowled as Tricklepaw raced down the tree. "Get help, Twitchpaw!"

As Twitchpaw leaped towards the Great Tree, the first cat she saw was thankfully, her mentor. Relieved, she rushed up to him. "Trailblaze," she gasped. "Come quick! Splashpaw's fallen of Sunningtree and I think he might be..." She couldn't finish the sentence, but Trailblaze had already leaped to his paws.

"Crowpelt," the ginger-and-white warrior called immediately. Crowpelt, still on watch duty, blinked in shock at the mention of his name. "Let's go."

When the black tom hesitated, Trailblaze looked back towards him impatiently. "What are you waiting for? We need to go."

The defender arched his back, lashing his tail from side to side. "You haven't needed me since you switched to being a warrior and got yourself a mate!" Crowpelt finally choked out. "But maybe you never did. I was always the one who needed you. Face it, your life is better without me!"

His words hung in the frozen air until Trailblaze swished his tail, looking offended. "What are you talking about—"

The scene felt oddly familiar. The image of Splashpaw falling out of the tree played in Twitchpaw's mind, and her pelt prickled as she remembered the way she had frozen. Helpless to stop anything that might have happened.

Helpless, like in the alley again.

A surge of emotion washed through Twitchpaw, suppressing her fears. She *wasn't* helpless. Maybe she couldn't help Splashpaw, but she could change this.

"I need both of you now," she cut in in a whisper as they both turned to face her. "I can tell Trailblaze still cares about you, Crowpelt. And I'm sorry if he's been too busy training me to spend as much time with you as before..." Twitchpaw blinked as the familiar surge of guilt washed over her. "And yeah, maybe my mentor forgets sometimes...but the way he talks about you during training, you can tell. You're still family."

Trailblaze nodded slowly. "Crow...I might have saved you as a kit, but think about every time we've saved each others' lives since." His voice dropped as he approached the defender. "I never stopped needing you."

Crowpelt hesitated, ears flattened against his head, before touching

his head lightly to Trailblaze's. The two old friends stood there for a moment, muzzles resting on each other. Then the black tom turned around briskly and beckoned the warrior to follow.

Before they dashed off, Crowpelt paused for a second at Twitchpaw. The defender mumbled a few low, nearly inaudible words, yet they were everything.

"Don't blame yourself."

Chapter 15

Splashpaw. Skylark's heart felt as cold as rocks. Her apprentice had been unconscious when her Clanmates had found him, his body bruised and his front leg scraped and broken, but thankfully most of his impact seemed to have been cushioned by a pile of snow. Now he had been carefully carried back to his nest by her Clanmates. Although, Skylark did notice that Lichenpaw was mysteriously absent.

Creekstorm stared worriedly at her kit. Her deep blue eyes shone with concern. "What happened?" she asked tightly, resting her muzzle on Splashpaw's head. "Will he be okay?"

He has to be. Skylark glanced at her unconscious apprentice, lying stretched in his nest with a pained expression. Thank WishClan he was still breathing. "I'll do my best."

Creekstorm nodded. The black warrior looked as tired as Skylark felt. "Come on, everyone. Let's leave Skylark to it," Creekstorm called to the apprentices. Eeveepaw and Twitchpaw backed away hesitantly, but Tricklepaw stayed where he was. The young fawn tom's blue eyes were fixed on his brother with a determined expression. "I'm not leaving him!"

Kestrelflame padded to his side, placing her tail on her apprentice's back. "You're going to have to be the toughest you've ever been, Tricklepaw."

That seemed to do the trick. Tricklepaw padded over to his mentor, glancing back worriedly at his littermate. "Will he be okay?"

All the cats seemed to look up at Skylark for confirmation. Honestly, she had no idea, but the looks in her Clanmate's eyes made it clear what the answer should be. "He will," she meowed firmly. *He has to be.*

"Call us if you need any help," Twitchpaw told her as they left.

Squishypelt stayed beside Splashpaw, curling up next to his kit.

The medicine tree felt so quiet without Splashpaw's cheery voice. She hadn't realised how much the young tom had brightened up the medicine ash until now. She pulled away from his limp body, trying to focus on sorting herbs, but it felt strange not to have her apprentice there. Skylark quickly gathered rush to fix his fractured leg in place and mixed up a broom poultice. His jaw was also injured from where he had hit the ground. *Was it...comfrey root for that?* she guessed. Dock would soothe his surface wounds, but she needed thyme for the shock. Did she even have enough thyme? A quick rummage in the holes and dips in the tree confirmed it: no sight of the herb.

The medicine cat pushed her panic away. *Chamomile will have to do for now.* Would he be able to swallow it? Skylark watched the grey-and-white tom's closed eyes and shuddering chest rising and falling. She felt along his chest—at least his ribs didn't seem to be broken; Avalanchefall had said that could kill a cat.

Skylark managed to place the chamomile in Splashpaw's mouth. With a pang she remembered the method he had shown her when they had gone to help the MarshClan cats: to gently massage a cat's throat to help them swallow.

I miss you.

Skylark swallowed. She ran her eyes along Splashpaw's limp tortoiseshell body, wishing that he would magically wake up and talk to her and everything would be normal again.

"Why is it so easy for you?" Skylark found herself meowing aloud. The worry in her heart was something she had never felt for any cat before. She *needed* him to get better...and so did the Clan.

"How am I going to be a medicine cat without you?" she whispered.

Squishypelt was curled up next to his son. He had someone watching over him already. Skylark tore her eyes away, pushing through the leaves of the ash tree. Maybe she could gather herbs alone for the first time.

No...she had always been alone in Twolegplace. Why was this any different?

Skylark found herself padding onto the Great Tree. Sparrowberry glanced over and walked up to her, arching her tail into a series of motions.

"Um...Splashpaw's going to be fine." For the first time, Skylark regretted not learning signs. The rusty-coloured she-cat continued, and though Skylark didn't understand it all, she caught one distinct sign of a low tail; *hunting.*

"You want to go hunting with me?" Skylark guessed, blinking in surprise. No one had ever asked her that before. Sparrowberry nodded, her sky-blue eyes waiting for a response. Skylark realised that she had rarely seen the warrior hunt alone; either Trailblaze, Vixenpool or some other Clanmate would always go along. Was that because of her deafness, or did she just enjoy the company?

Skylark tensed and prepared to shake her head, but stopped herself. *Did I have anything better to do anyway?*

"Okay," Skylark dipped her head. She could pick the thyme for Splashpaw along the way. *I suppose I could use the company.*

***

Walking along with Sparrowberry was different from what Skylark was used to. With Avalanchefall and Splashpaw, she always had something to talk about. But she didn't even know the signs needed to communicate with Sparrowberry!

However, as snowflakes started to spiral through the leaf-bare air, Skylark began to relax in not having to. The forest was so cold and quiet. It was so different from the concrete, loud Twolegplace she had grown up in. The crisp air felt almost magical against her fur, and for the first time in a while, Skylark wasn't thinking about WishClan. Or Darkspirits, or herbs, or how to be a good medicine cat.

All that faded to the back of her mind as she stared wonderingly at

the snow-topped trees. The constant discomfort in her empty belly didn't even matter now. Skylark picked up a trot, feeling the soft snow below her. The trees spread their bare branches overhead and provided pale shadows against the white ground. Skylark suddenly felt the urge to leap around like a kit.

Sparrowberry dropped to the ground. Skylark looked back at the warrior, wondering if she was about to hunt. But the reddish-brown she-cat jumped into the snow instead, sending puffs of white from beneath her paws. The warrior landed in a pile of it and purred as she looked up at Skylark with playful blue eyes.

Skylark couldn't resist joining in. The ground was freezing, yet she embraced every second of it as she frolicked in the snow. She had never relaxed like this with any cat, not even Avalanchefall. As fun as half-moon meetings had been, the sessions always had an atmosphere of tension as the medicine cats waited for WishClan's messages.

Sparrowberry purred, tossing pawfuls of snow at her. "Hey!" Skylark shook her fur out, before having an idea. She scooped up a ball of snow with her brown-tipped tail, flinging it at the other she-cat.

Sparrowberry straightened up as the cold flakes hit her pelt. She narrowed her eyes playfully at Skylark before jumping onto her, lightly pinning her to the ground. Skylark struggled beneath the warrior but was released just as quickly. Both the she-cats tumbled into the snow, gasping for breath between purrs.

Skylark had never known the joyful peace that she did as she lay beside Sparrrowberry, splayed on her back. Skylark turned to look at the poppy in her shoulder fur, slightly beaten up but just as beautiful as when she had first laid eyes on it. As she gazed up into the sky, the setting sunlight falling through the trees, a fresh new feeling spread over the medicine cat.

So that's why Avalanchefall loves leaf-bare so much.

***

The camp was the same as when the she-cats had left. Trailblaze

was talking with Crowpelt and Laurelcall near the defenders' acacia, while Puddlesoar mewed to Alderwing about his latest discovery. Sparkstar leaned on a branch casually as he sat facing Eeveepaw. Kestrelflame perched on a high branch by herself, grooming her pale fur with firm licks.

Minus all the herb gathering and talking to the afterlife, Skylark realised that maybe they were just all like her. All coming from different backgrounds, all united by fate to serve in the Clan that wasn't even supposed to exist. All just trying to keep each other alive.

All with the most beautiful home to protect.

Thank you. Skylark might not have known the sign, but she dipped her head gratefully to the warrior. Sparrowberry responded with a nod, her blue eyes sparkling as she padded towards the warriors' chestnut.

Skylark stared at the catch that the reddish-brown she-cat had laid in the prey hole. A thin squirrel and two birds. After a second of thinking, she picked up the squirrel and headed for the elders' rowan.

It was a part of camp that Skylark rarely visited, if at all. Splashpaw was usually the one taking care of the elders. The rowan tree held the two elders' nests that were layered with extra moss and bedding, which the defenders must have done.

"Who's there?" Miloheart's creaky purr sounded.

"Don't you know our *medicine cat*?" Stormfall's mew was rough, as if there were rocks in his throat. "Really, she's quite important."

Skylark felt her pelt prickle self-consciously. "Not *that* important," she corrected. She stepped forward, draping the squirrel over a branch.

"Well, I'll be." Miloheart's green eyes glowed as he sniffed at the piece of prey and licked his lips hungrily. "Thank you Skylark!"

Skylark nodded, at a loss for words. She simply dipped her head to

the elders and trotted quickly to the edge of the elders' rowan.

Wait. As Skylark's vision focused, she realised that in front of her...was the medicine ash. Had the two trees been so close all along? Shaking out her white-and-brown pelt of the remaining snow, she leaped across the branches and landed on the medicine ash.

She headed to Splashpaw's nest, noting that Squishypelt had left but his scent was still fresh. Just then, Splashpaw stirred in his nest and his eyes fluttered open. Hope rose in Skylark's chest. *He's awake!* He blinked, looking like he was trying to get up, but then winced and relaxed again. "What happened?" he managed to croak out, his mew strained.

"You fell off Sunningtree." Skylark brushed her tail over Splashpaw's fur gently to smoothen it. The tears she had been holding back threatened to spill over into tears of relief. "Don't try to get up yet."

"Why would I fall—ow." Splashpaw cringed in his nest. Skylark's heart melted seeing him like that. "I...don't know," she responded slowly. "I didn't hear the story from the other apprentices."

Splashpaw closed his eyes and put his head down. He flinched. A long pause... blue eyes locked with hers, then turned away. "I remember."

"You do?"

"Lichenpaw and I...had an argumemt." His words dissolved into a low moan as he writhed with pain. Skylark hurriedly pawed him two poppy seeds.

"We didn't think about how high it was...I was so angry at her." Splashpaw's meow edged with desperate shame as he looked down. He let out a whine of pain and closed his mouth tenderly.

Skylark shook her head in disbelief. She knew that there was tension between the siblings...but what had led to such a heated argument? "It's okay," she soothed, holding up the poppy seeds. "You need to rest."

Splashpaw sighed and took the seeds, curling up in his nest once again. A few seconds later he had drifted off, but this time, his breath was deeper and less pained.

Skylark watched the sleeping apprentice with an aching heart. It seemed like the worst timing for such a thing to happen, in the middle of leaf-bare, when the Clan was already facing a prey shortage. Why did it have to get worse? Just one moment had snatched half their medicine cat unit away, and Skylark didn't know if she could handle healing her Clanmates on her own.

But WishClan had brought her this far already.

I'll take care of them, Splashpaw, Skylark promised silently. *Just as you always did.*

Chapter 16

When Twitchpaw awoke, dawn light streamed into in the apprentices' birch. She yawned as birdsong entered her tired ears. Despite the strange few days that had passed, the fresh dawn air never failed to cheer her up.

Dustkit was squealing joyfully as she chased Rainkit around, darting among branches. The kits were three moons old and every bit as active as Chasecloud.

"Hi, Twitchpaw!" Rainkit panted, pausing his game when he saw her climbing down. "Are you going to see Splashpaw?"

"Yep." Twitchpaw glanced in the direction of the medicine ash, figuring the tom could use some cheering up. *Trailblaze will understand if I'm a little late for training.*

"Will you join our game when you're done?" Dustkit looked up at her, her eyes shining happily. *They remind me of Eeveepaw when he was younger.* The grey apprentice smiled, glad that they still had energy despite the Clan's situation. Twitchpaw dipped her head at the kits apologetically. "Maybe after training? I'm sure the elders would be more than happy to play, though." She waved her tail at Stormfall and Miloheart lying on the elders' rowan.

Rainkit purred, unfazed. "Okay! I hope Eeveepaw can play with us too. By the way, do you know what the barn is like?"

"The barn?" Twitchpaw was confused, before remembering how Kiteheart and Chasecloud had joined the Clan before they were even a Clan. "You mean where your parents came from?"

Dustkit tossed a moss ball in the air and scrambled to catch it with her brown paws. "We heard them say something about maybe going back!" she meowed. "What even *is* a barn?"

Twitchpaw's green eyes widened in shock. Were Chasecloud and

Kiteheart planning on leaving? Was RobinClan going to lose two of its most valuable members because of the MarshClan situation?

"...I hope you won't need to." The Clan had come together for a better chance at life. Leaf-bare was hard for all of them, and Splashpaw's accident—she shuddered—had been *terrible,* but the forest was the safest place Twitchpaw had lived in so far. After moons of living as Clan cats, were they really planning on *leaving?*

Still wondering, she dipped her head to the kits in acknowledgment and started crossing the edge of the Great Tree to get to the medicine ash.

"Splashpaw?" Twitchpaw called as she padded onto the ash tree. The apprentice was still curled in his nest, with Skylark nearby sorting herbs. He didn't even raise his head to look at her, his tortoiseshell fur ruffled and his front leg twisted at an awkward angle. His jaw was also twisted to the side. "Oh. Hi, Twitchpaw."

Twitchpaw padded towards his nest, uncomfortably remembering what had happened the day before. She had never seen the medicine cat apprentice so angry before. "How are you?"

Splashpaw shrugged before wincing. "Everything hurts, but Skylark says I'll recover. *Eventually*." He sighed heavily. Twitchpaw looked at him, concerned. "I wish I'd never argued with Lichenpaw. Maybe she was right. I've been so proud to be a medicine cat that I guess I convinced myself that she couldn't be part of it."

Twitchpaw hesitated before pressing her fur lightly to his short, bruised coat. "You're an amazing part of the Clan, Splashpaw. You deserve to have that."

"You think so?" Splashpaw's ice-blue eyes softened, making him look more like his usual self as he gazed up at her. "Thanks. The thing is, I love RobinClan, but I can't help wanting to help other Clans too." He sighed, deflating a bit again. "If only Lichenpaw understood..."

"Have you tried talking to her?"

"No...I haven't seen her since yesterday." Splashpaw let out a soft groan as he shifted in the nest. "Ugh, it's going to be so awkward! I don't blame her for avoiding me." His mew was sad at the mention of his sister.

Twitchpaw knew what her response should be, but she wasn't sure if she could bring herself to suggest it. Lichenpaw was the one who caused Splashpaw's accident, and she had been staying away from the torbie she-cat since then. *What if something like that happens to me too?* If Twitchpaw got hurt, she would be set back from her apprenticeship, and she wouldn't be able to train with Trailblaze or Eeveepaw until she recovered...but right now, it was Splashpaw who couldn't do all these things. The medicine cat apprentice's sister who caused him to fall out of Sunningtree. Maybe she had to do this, for him, even if Lichenpaw scared her. Twitchpaw swallowed her rising anxiety at the prospect. "I can...talk to her for you?" she mumbled.

Splashpaw blinked, whiskers twitching. He paused for a long time, then shook his head, wincing as he did so. "Thank you, but that's okay."

"Really?" Twitchpaw felt tension loosen in her shoulders. *Quoting Skylark, I'm an apprentice, not a magician!*

Splashpaw nodded. "I need to think about it a little, and I think Lichenpaw would too. We can work it out." His eyes were unusually dull, but Twitchpaw could see the care that he still had for his sister; cracked, but not shattered.

As Splashpaw laid his head on his paws again, Twitchpaw placed her tail warmly on his back. "Okay. Get better soon."

As she padded out, Trailblaze was walking up to her from the warriors' chestnut. Twitchpaw glanced as the dawn patrol got ready to head out, Crowpelt included, and remembered the day before. An idea struck her.

"Is it okay if I train with Alderwing and Eeveepaw today?" she asked, sideglancing at the dark-furred defender.

Trailblaze's amber eyes brightened as he rubbed his ginger paws together. She could tell that he was trying not to get too hopeful about the idea. "Well, I suppose if Alderwing doesn't mind." He opened his jaws to call out to the calico as she padded alongside Vixenpool. "Hey, Alderwing! Do you mind taking Twitchpaw for training today?" Twitchpaw realised that he was also instinctively signing with his tail. *Probably from spending so much time with his mate.*

The calico warrior looked at him, puzzled, but dipped her head in agreement.

"Thanks!" Trailblaze purred. The ginger-and-white tom flicked his tail in a goodbye to Twitchpaw as he trotted off to join the patrol.

A voice jumpscared her from above. "So you're training with us, Twitch!"

Twitchpaw jolted, lifting her head to see Eeveepaw smirking at her from above. His white-tipped tail whipped excitedly from side to side, his violet eyes shining. "Thank the stars!" her friend exclaimed. "My training buddy!"

Twitchpaw grabbed the branch he was on and shook it with her paws, while careful not to overdo it, causing him to cling on tight. The shock in his expression turned to a narrowed-eyed yet approving smile back at her.

"I appreciate you being more enthusiastic about training, Eeveepaw," Alderwing stepped forward to meet the apprentices. "Instead of dragging your paws and complaining the whole time."

Eeveepaw puffed out his white chest. "Yeah, I do *not* do that," he meowed, though his voice was calmer than Twitchpaw expected. "Race you to the training tree!" The brown apprentice jumped up and ran down as fast as his legs could carry him.

Which was not actually that fast. Twitchpaw knew she could beat him easily, after moons of training with Trailblaze, but she decided to hang back and wait for Alderwing instead.

"I know how training with Trailblaze must be like, Twitchpaw," the calico warrior stated as they picked up the pace to catch up with Eeveepaw. "So I apologise if mine is just as boring as Eeveepaw says."

Twitchpaw shook her head quickly. "No...I don't think it's really your fault. Eeveepaw's always wanted to become a warrior as quickly as possible." She thought back to when they had been introduced to warrior life, when Eeveepaw had already decided that he wanted to be the greatest warrior of all time.

"And he will be, in time," Alderwing sighed. "But not a great one if he keeps trying to speedrun his training." The snow felt cool against Twitchpaw's paws as they jumped to the ground. "He's my first apprentice," the warrior meowed quietly as they padded along. "I just want to do everything right."

Twitchpaw's heart twisted as she remembered Eeveepaw saying something similar to her the day they had first agreed to start training together. *We're the first RobinClan apprentices ever. Don't you want to be somecat special?*

"He'll understand," she meowed quietly. She saw her friend up ahead, his brown fur standing out against the snow.

Alderwing hesitated. "He's been a lot less stubborn lately, but still. I don't want this to end in another useless quarrel."

"Eeveepaw's a nicer cat than you might think," Twitchpaw assured her with a purr. Under his impatient ambitions and prankster behaviour, her friend was one of the funniest and kindest cats she had met after leaving Twolegplace.

Eeveepaw was pacing around, waiting for them to catch up. "Hey, what are you waiting for?!" he called back at them.

Alderwing nodded, quickening her stride beside Twitchpaw. "I'll think about it."

A fresh layer of snow had fallen over the training tree, topping its long, widespread branches. Twitchpaw sped up towards the solid,

familiar tree, easily catching up with her friend as she trotted across the fluffy, fresh white snow.

Eeveepaw leaped onto a branch angled towards the ground, his hind paws scrabbling to pull himself onto the branch. Twitchpaw set her eyes on a higher branch. Since she had never ended up learning battle moves, Trailblaze had spent the extra time training her on physical abilities needed to manoeuvre and hunt in the trees safely. She sprung upwards, sensing her claws grasp on the branch as she curled her body up and aimed to land on top of it. She felt herself overbalance as she did—leaning dangerously back on her back paws as a jolt of fear rushed through her, but caught herself at the last second.

Alderwing jumped onto the training tree, flicking her fluffy tail. "Right. You both are ending your apprenticeship soon, so I want you to show me your hunting skills. Bonus points for above-ground catches."

Twitchpaw nodded, a smile curling her muzzle as she imagined Trailblaze's enthusiastic amber gaze. Hunting was his favourite thing, next to exploring. She could see why they were being sent on more patrols recently.

Eeveepaw caught her eye, smiling in that mischievous way. "We got this," he murmured to her.

The apprentices started their hunt, climbing agilely into the treetops. After all that extra training with Eeveepaw, she felt like she could communicate with him almost as well as Trailblaze. *Sure, he doesn't get all the signals yet,* Twitchpaw thought as she tracked down a squirrel. But as she watched Eeveepaw lunge at and grab a hummingbird, she felt pride in their improvement.

She was about to leap at the grey squirrel when suddenly, something caught her attention. An unfamiliar shape moving in the distance, in a hunting stalk. Then another further back. And at the back of the patrol, was Claystar.

They were nowhere near Bigroots. A chill that had nothing to do with leaf-bare went down her spine.

Eeveepaw came up next to her, the bird hanging from his jaws. Below, Twitchpaw saw Alderwing staring at the same direction, her dark ginger and brown pelt prickling along her spine.

"They're...going far, huh," Twitchpaw whispered, not wanting to believe her eyes.

"That's it!" Eeveepaw scowled. "Let's go and show them we mean business!" He leaped down the training tree and started storming towards them, but Alderwing put a tail on his shoulder to stop him.

Eeveepaw looked like he was about to protest before Alderwing gave him a sharp look. "We need to do this right. We can't attack with only three of us."

"But don't you want to?" Eeveepaw challenged. "Don't you see what they're doing?!"

"Yes of COURSE I want to!!" Alderwing snapped. "I'm angry as well as you! I want nothing more than to rush over and scream at them until they die!" Twitchpaw and Eeveepaw stared at her as the normally composed and rational warrior continued.

A silence hung in the air as Twitchpaw held her breath. Eeveepaw dug his claws into the ground and looked at Alderwing with bewilderment. "Then why don't you?"

"I'm trying to do the right thing," his mentor sighed, glancing at Twitchpaw. Twitchpaw nodded encouragement back. "As a warrior. And you know...your mentor."

Twitchpaw gazed at the scene in front of her; the MarshClan patrol, but at the center of her vision, Eeveepaw and Alderwing. Both cats trying to claw their way up and prove themselves. But although she felt the same indignance at the MarshClan cats disrupting the truce, Twitchpaw also realised that she wasn't ready to launch herself into defense as they did.

Was violence actually the right thing to do in this situation? *Maybe,* she realised, if only so Chasecloud and Kiteheart's kits would have a safe place to grow up. One that she wished she had as a kit.

Eeveepaw stared, his violet eyes narrowed as if deep in thought. Then he nodded and backed away, as Twitchpaw exhaled with relief. "Then we'd better tell Sparkstar."

Chapter 17

Skylark was hoping to see the Darkspirit that night. The dark, misty dream space was just as compelling as ever, but this time the ghost cat was nowhere to be found. She stepped forward, and a roaring started in her ears. Confused, she opened her mouth to call out to any Darkspirits. But a vision flared to life before her eyes, so bright and sudden it nearly knocked her over. A snowy landscape appeared, replacing the one of the Darkspirits. Skylark was crouched in a reed-woven den, so different from the treetop landscape she was used to. A small, dusky brown she-cat was staring up at her blankly. She was thin, her ribs showing plainly through her coat. Skylark felt her heart twist with love, love that she realised was far from her own. Then waves of visceral anger and frustration overcame her. She was shaking. Skylark pushed a limp piece of prey forward, cupping the she-cat's lovely, sallow face with her paws.

The anger turned to raw grief and guilt as the light faded from the she-cat's dark blue eyes.

Skylark felt like her stomach had fallen out of Sunningtree, leaving an empty shell. *No! I'm so sorry...*

The scene disappeared in a blink of an eye as Skylark jolted awake, her breath catching in her throat. The guilt and fear still lingered, wrapping their icy paws around her. She felt like she had been dropped back into her body. Skylark moved her front paws. They were the same brown they always were. She was herself again.

Who was that? Had it been a vision? A vision of what might happen if the Clan's prey sources continued to fall? The she-cat's lifeless blue eyes replayed in her mind, as the brown fur ruffled along her back. It had felt so real.

Maybe Hurricanepaw will know what it means. Skylark's eyes rested on Splashpaw's sleeping form. She padded to his nest nestled between two branches, wishing she could talk it over with her

apprentice. As sunhigh light spilled through the leaves and onto her back through the cold leaf-bare air, Skylark applied a comfrey poultice to Splashpaw's shoulders and ribs.

It had been a half-moon since the incident, and though Splashpaw's bruises had healed and his leg was doing better, she still worried about his condition. Walking still gave him trouble at times, and his appetite had dwindled. *If he keeps this up, he's going to be weaker from the lack of food,* she thought. The worry from her dream felt like it was spilling over to waking life. *Though...it's not just him.* Her belly growled, reminding her of her own hunger.

A rustle sounded as Twitchpaw padded onto the low ash tree like she had been doing quite often before trainings to check on Splashpaw. Sometimes she came with Eeveepaw or Tricklepaw, and sometimes she came alone.

A lot of cats had been visiting the medicine ash regularly. Not just to visit Splashpaw, but to ask if Skylark needed help with her duties now that her apprentice was hurt. Earlier that day, Sparrowberry and Vixenpool had helped her gather more marigold, and Mistleswoop promised to watch over him when she went to the half-moon meeting at night. *WishClan is really on my side.* She said a silent thanks to her warrior ancestors.

"Hi, Twitchpaw," Skylark was glad to see the grey apprentice. She had become a familiar face in the medicine ash. "Do you need anything?"

Twitchpaw shook her head. "Just seeing Splashpaw." She glanced at the tom's sleeping form, eyes glittering with concern. "Is he better?"

"A bit," Skylark answered. "I think he'll make a full recovery soon enough." She shook her head, musing out loud. "I still can't believe this happened."

"Neither can I," Twitchpaw admitted, shuffling her paws together. "Lichenpaw and Splashpaw, fighting?"

"I can't believe I didn't notice." *Have I really not been paying enough attention to my apprentice?*

Twitchpaw's green eyes drifted over to Splashpaw's nest. "They always seemed so close, even when we first joined the group. I can't believe I didn't even *try* to stop it."

Skylark remembered that she and Twitchpaw, along with Moosebloom and Eeveepaw, had all followed Sparkstar as he led an escape out of the big Twoleg den with bramble caves. "You were a kittypet too, weren't you?"

Twitchpaw glanced up at her, pelt prickling. The grey apprentice looked away. "I'd rather not talk about it."

"I never told any cat either," Skylark mused. Though, when would she have? She had only started talking to Sparrowberry after Splashpaw's accident, and Avalanchefall hadn't stayed long enough for her to have a chance to tell him.

Twitchpaw's head snapped up again, clearly interested. "You can tell me if you like," she offered.

Something about the she-cat's kind green eyes made Skylark decide to, as she took a deep breath. "I was the runt of my litter. I don't think we were supposed to be born; we were put outside that big Twoleg den. I don't know where my siblings went, but I was a loner in Twolegplace since I could remember."

Twitchpaw nodded in understanding. It felt good to finally tell someone, even if it didn't matter anymore. Skylark waited for Twitchpaw to do the same, but she remained silent.

"I actually wanted to see if Splashpaw wanted to watch our game, the one we're playing with the kits," the younger she-cat explained with a purr.

Skylark glanced back at her apprentice, still curled up in his nest. Her apprentice had been such a great help to her, and maybe she felt like she owed it to Splashpaw, to be there when he couldn't.

"I could...join?" she suggested before she could change her mind.

Twitchpaw smiled, dipping her head in agreement. As Skylark followed the apprentice out of the ash tree, she caught sight of

Sparrowberry near the warriors' chesnut and hesitated. She needed someone to watch Splashpaw in case he woke up. But would the warrior even be willing to? Sure, they had shared prey together a few times and Sparrowberry had helped her collect herbs, but it wasn't *her* duty.

It's not your duty to play with the kits either! Skylark reasoned with herself. As the reddish-brown she-cat caught her eye, the medicine cat signed, *Watch Splashpaw? Shouldn't move too much.*

Sparrowberry dipped her head in agreement. Skylark exhaled with relief and blinked gratefully at the warrior.

She could hear Rainkit's playful meows before they reached the nursery willow. Kiteheart was racing Dustkit around while Eeveepaw perched on a higher branch, narrowing his shining violet eyes at them.

"Where's Chasecloud?" Skylark wondered.

"Mom went on patrol!" Dustkit told her. The she-kit's blue eyes shone as she padded towards the medicine cat. "Are you going to play with us?"

Eeveepaw leaped down from his branch, landing squarely on Twitchpaw. Twitchpaw tumbled onto a low branch but grasped on with her claws and dextrously flipped herself back over. She flicked her tail over his ears, purring with amusement.

"We're playing get-the-moss-ball!" Rainkit purred, kicking a ball of moss around his dark grey paws. "Now we can have three cats on each team."

"I call Twitchpaw," Eeveepaw meowed instantly.

"Can I be on your team, Eeveepaw?" Rainkit asked hopefully. The brown apprentice nodded in reply with a smile. "Come on over, Rainy!" The dappled grey tom-kit pranced over to Eeveepaw's side.

"Skylark's on our team?!" Dustkit flicked her tail happily. Skylark was surprised that the colourpoint was so enthused to have her on the same team. "I haven't played this game before," she warned the

kit.

"But you're tall!" The she-kit meowed earnestly.

Skylark raised her eyebrows. She wasn't much taller than Eeveepaw. "That's the first time someone ever called me tall," she commented under her breath. Twitchpaw *mrrow*ed with amusement.

The moss ball sat in the middle of the two teams. Skylark had never imagined herself playing a kit's game. That had always been Splashpaw's thing, while she was just...the medicine cat. *I'm doing this for him,* she reminded herself.

Just then, Eeveepaw let out a yowl. "GO!"

Skylark tried to grab the moss ball, but Rainkit knocked it out of her paws cleanly, purring with delight. He threw it to Eeveepaw, who was now on an upper branch. Eeveepaw tossed it over Skylark's head and the moss ball landed on the ground, next to the den bellow the willow tree. Seeing that the moss ball was free, Skylark darted down toward it. Dustkit got to it first and passed it easily to her. *Just need to get to the other side!* Skylark climbed back up and raced towards the other team's branch. Kiteheart was at the side, but Skylark was almost there...she was sure she could make it...

Then suddenly Twitchpaw burst out from a hole in the trunk and snatched the moss ball away. *Fox-dung!* Skylark thought. If only she *had* passed it to Kiteheart. The brown tabby defender raced to Twitchpaw with surprising agility, and as the apprentice tried to pass the moss to Rainkit, the warrior intercepted and flung it away with her paw. The moss ball plummeted through the branches.

"Get it, Eeveepaw!" Twitchpaw mewed as her friend raced down to get it. Dustkit scrambled down, racing beside Eeveepaw.

Just then, Skylark noticed the sunset patrol coming back into camp. Chasecloud, Flashflood, Laurelcall, and Squishypelt had climbed up the Great Tree and were trotting over to Sparkstar's den. Pausing in her tracks, she angled her long ears to listen.

"We definitely should fight back," Flashflood announced to Sparkstar, dark ginger pelt prickling. Laurelcall laid a tail on her shoulder and nodded. "That's right. They refused to listen. RobinClan needs our land...whether MarshClan likes it or not." The white cat's voice was as calm as it always was, but his amber eyes had darkened.

Sparkstar closed his eyes. "Are you sure this isn't a misunderstanding?"

Chasecloud flicked her grey-tipped tail from side to side. "Sparkstar, I know you don't want to fight because you still think this is Oakstar's Clan!" She sighed, looking down. "But he's *dead*. We need you to be a strong leader. Or else...Kiteheart and I might need to find our own place to stay."

Skylark's eyes widened in disbelief. She turned to watch Dustkit and Rainkit chase down the moss ball, nimbly navigating the bare willow branches. They were the first RobinClan kits to be born in their new territory.

Her brown-tipped tail swept from side to side as she recalled first arriving in the forest. She had been just as ready to leave. And from what Splashpaw had told her, so had he. *But then we would never have become a team,* she reflected. *I wouldn't have met Avalanchefall or the other medicine cats. I wouldn't be part of a Clan.*

Sparkstar sighed. "Let me talk to Vixenpool and Skylark first."

Flashflood was lashing her tail impatiently, but she allowed herself to be led away by Laurelcall as the patrol dispersed.

"We won!" Suddenly Skylark was jerked back to the game as Dustkit jumped around, squealing in joy. Kiteheart padded over to his kit, touching his nose to hers. "Good job," he meowed in his usual quiet way. The brown tabby pointed his muzzle at the patrol. "Mom's over there—shall we go say hi?"

"Oh yeah! I'll tell her that we won the game." Dustkit grinned at Skylark before climbing down with Rainkit and her father. Skylark waved her tail as a goodbye to the kit as well. "Thanks for letting

me play."

Skylark padded out of the nursery willow, hooking her claws into a branch as she crossed to the Great Tree. She found Sparkstar and Vixenpool already there and scrambled to join them. Vix gave her a warm smile, and Skylark dipped her head back, remembering how the deputy had helped her collect marigold days before.

"I'm glad you're here, Skylark," Sparkstar meowed. "Alderwing reported a patrol hunting past Bigroots recently, so I sent the dawn patrol to make sense of it..."

"I know," Skylark told him quickly. "I heard them."

Sparkstar dipped his head in acknowledgment. "I don't mind leading a fight...if needed. What do you think?"

Skylark remembered her conversation with Claystar when she and Splashpaw visited MarshClan. The tom had seemed friendly enough, but now that she thought about it...he *had* been asking her weird questions about prey. Just then, the dream from the night before appeared in her mind again. She swallowed as she recalled the vivid grief and helplessness that had washed over her.

"I had a dream..." Skylark whispered. "I was watching a cat die of hunger. I think it's a clear sign that we have to defend our land."

Shock filled the deputy's hazel eyes. "You *watched* a..." Vixenpool cut herself off. "That sounds brutal."

Sparkstar nodded slowly. "Okay. I'd better call a Clan meeting, then." The leader's voice was resigned.

Just then, Skylark heard a noise from the center of the Great Tree. "*My* prey!" Chasecloud argued, pulling the mouse towards her. "I caught this for Kiteheart and my kits!"

"I thought you were practically ready to leave?" Mistleswoop rolled her eyes. "Listen, all our problems would be solved if we just ATTACK MARSHCLAN TO DEATH."

Twitchpaw stepped forward. "Maybe just split it in half?" The grey

she-cat blinked at Mistleswoop and a flicker of fear passed over her green eyes. "Sparkstar, Vixenpool, and Skylark are still discussing what to do." Her whiskers twitched humourously. "I don't think beating Chasecloud over this will help your cause."

"Wow," Skylark mewed as the she-cats reluctantly tore the prey into two, and Twitchpaw padded towards her. "I thought for sure it would end in a fight."

Twitchpaw shrugged, giving a shy smile. "Me too, but we can't have our Clanmates fighting each other right now, can we?"

Sparkstar flicked his tail on the Highbranch. Skylark watched as the leader inhaled, then yowled, "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather under the Highbranch for a Clan meeting."

The Clan huddled around the Highbranch, Skylark and Twitchpaw following.

"It is time we take back our land," Sparkstar announced grandly. If the leader still had any doubts, he was doing a good job of hiding them. "MarshClan will hunt until Bigroots no longer. Starting today, RobinClan will fight for what's ours."

Chapter 18

Twitchpaw fidgeted with her paws, lost in thought. She pondered what to say to Trailblaze as she crossed the Great Tree towards the warriors' chestnut alongside Eeveepaw. Something had changed, and somehow, she had a newfound power of helping cats understand each other. *I don't want to be a warrior anymore. I want to help other cats.* She recalled what had happened the previous day. She hadn't *meant* to step into Mistleswoop and Chasecloud's spat, but with RobinClan gearing up for an attack, she hadn't liked the idea of them fighting each other.

"Blackbirds are the *best*," Eeveepaw commented beside her. "I haven't had one in ages."

Twitchpaw's stomach growled at the thought of the juicy bird. Just then, Tricklepaw jumped into their conversation. "I like squirrels," he meowed in a deep, rough voice that mirrored Kestrelflame's. "They're the toughest. Like me."

Eeveepaw rolled his violet eyes. "I'll catch up to you soon enough!" He puffed out his white chest proudly. "Alderwing's taking me for battle training."

"Thought you said she was like cardboard," Tricklepaw raised his eyebrows at the brown apprentice.

Eeveepaw shrugged, then flashed a smirk at the fawn tom. "At least she's better than Kestrelflame ever was!"

Twitchpaw felt a smile tug at her mouth. A moon ago Eeveepaw would have been complaining about his mentor. But her tail still flicked uneasily behind her. How was she going to tell Trailblaze?

"What's up?" Eeveepaw nudged her with his shoulder.

Twitchpaw sighed. "Our Leap of Faith is today," she pointed out. *Which means that we're going to have our warrior ceremony soon.* "I

don't think I'm *ready*-"

Tricklepaw swung his head to look at her, his blue eyes scanning her grey fur. "Are you tough?"

Twitchpaw pressed her lips together, insecurity filling her chest. She had never even learned any battle moves—and even though Trailblaze didn't seem to mind, it was all she could think about now that her Clanmates were planning an attack on MarshClan.

Her green eyes trailed over Puddlesoar and Mistleswoop sparring nearby. The two former rogues couldn't have looked more different; the blue-grey tabby was light with a determined, thoughtful expression, while his mate was stocky and fluffy, her missing front leg noticeable as she dodged his blows. But they were both purring as they did so.

"Why are you the best at this?" Puddlesoar purred as she avoided his blow, ducking underneath him. Mistleswoop stood up with him hanging over her back and he yelped as she chuckled.

Eeveepaw jumped to Twitchpaw's defense. "She's plenty tough!" His violet eyes sparkled with excitement, and Twitchpaw knew he was envisioning their warrior ceremony. It was what he had wanted since before they were apprenticed.

She was happy for him. But part of her knew it felt *wrong* for her tto be pronounced a warrior. She wasn't ready to defend RobinClan. And she wasn't brave enough to do it at the cost of her life.

She saw Trailblaze near the defenders' acacia. "I'd better go," Twitchpaw meowed, pointing at where her mentor was.

"Catch you later," Eeveepaw purred as he padded in the other direction with Tricklepaw. "At the Leap of Faith!"

I don't want to be a warrior. Twitchpaw turned the words over in her head. She had been training as one for so long...and her apprenticeship was nearly over. Wasn't it easier to stay as one?

She watched Flashflood spar with Laurelcall as she headed towards the acacia. What was the use if she couldn't fight?

I want to help other cats.

I want to...

Trailblaze brightened up when he saw her. The dawn light shone on his ginger pelt, reflecting it around the bare branches. He was sitting next to Laurelcall and Crowpelt, who nodded at Twitchpaw once before dropping his gaze. "Hey, Twitchpaw!" the warrior called.

Oh stars. Twitchpaw hesitated, her pace slowing. This would be a million times harder to say if his friends were there.

"Could I talk to you about something?" she asked, her heart starting to race. What if she was just bird-brained for thinking about it? There wasn't a role like the one she was asking for. Maybe he would say no, and get mad...*no.* This was the cat who had allowed her to sit out of all battle sessions for almost the whole of her apprenticeship. And he had switched roles from a defender to a warrior. Surely he would understand?

"Of course." Trailblaze brushed his pelt against Crowpelt's, winking at the defender. "Yes, I *am* coming back."

"I knew that." The black tom glanced at Trailblaze with a flicker of warmth in his grey eyes before licking a stray tuft of chest fur. "But uh, thanks for clarifying."

Seeing the two toms get along again gave Twitchpaw a burst of hope. Maybe she wasn't proposing something so dumb after all.

I don't want to be a warrior...I want to...

"You know I've enjoyed training as a warrior," Twitchpaw murmured. Trailblaze's ears swivelled towards her as he listened. "But I can't fight. I thought I needed to..." She stopped herself. "I mean, I guess I want to help other cats? But I don't want to be a medicine cat. Skylark and Splashpaw have that covered..."

"Twitchpaw!" Trailblaze's voice shook her out of her ramble as he tilted his head, a small smile along his muzzle. "What are you trying to say?"

Twitchpaw shook her head, her fur heating up slightly. "Warriors fight for their Clan," she meowed, remembering how she felt while doing extra training with Eeveepaw, seeing Trailblaze and Crowpelt spend time together again, learning about tail signals during training. How Splashpaw was still lying injured in the medicine ash. Her heart ached for her friend; that would never happen again if she could help it. "Is there...a role to help the Clan stay united, sort out disagreements and stuff?" Twitchpaw suggested, looking down. "I don't want to be useless..." Her voice broke off. *And what's more useless than a cat who can't fight?* Even though she had trained alongside Eeveepaw, and they had both grown into decent hunters and climbers, a wave of shame rushed over her every time he rambled to her about the battle moves he had learned.

She was always a step behind.

Trailblze narrowed his amber eyes. "Twitchpaw. When in WISHCLAN were you ever useless?" He flicked his tail towards Crowpelt and Laurelcall, gaze wide with disbelief. "You gave me my best friends back. It was you, wasn't it?"

A purr rose in her throat as she nodded. "Partly."

"How long has this been going on?" Trailblaze mused to himself, leaping to his paws. "Who dared make my apprentice feel useless?"

He looked around suspiciously, happening to stare straight at Eggnogshine. The fluffy golden tom stared blankly back, his ears drooping as he dipped his head apologetically with an *I don't know what I did but I'm sorry!* expression.

The grey apprentice sighed as Eggnogshine hurried away. "It's...a long story."

One that she had vowed never to reveal. One that she had tried not to think about.

One that had always been *her fault.*

"Go on," Trailblze's meow was soft.

Twitchpaw took a deep breath, her body trying to turn itself into

stone. "I was left alone a lot as a kittypet. My Twoleg would sometimes be there, but in the day he'd leave for long periods. I got so *bored*." She caught Trailblaze's gaze, and to her relief, he nodded in understanding.

"One day, I decided to explore. I got out of the fence and wandered into this alley...it was shady and smelled like food...but there were rogues everywhere. I think they were...they would fight each other over the smallest thing, and really *hurt* each other, and when they saw me they tried to attack me too." She shuddered, remembering the menace in their eyes as they glanced at her. Terror had pounded through her body as she rushed to escape. "I ran as far as I could, but some Twolegs found me and I ended up in the large Twoleg den with Sparkstar." Twitchpaw moved her back paw, revealing the scar on the inside of her left back leg.

Trailblaze's amber eyes were wide and startled. "You kind of lost me there," the ginger tom admitted, "But that sounds *terrible*! I had no idea."

"No one else does," Twitchpaw admitted. "Sparkstar promised I would be safe if I joined him."

"Then he'll probably agree to your new role." Trailblaze purred. Twitchpaw blinked at him, his words sinking in.

A sensation of warmth rushed over her despite the cold wind that whipped over the tree branches. If she had a new role, one that she could excel at...then there wouldn't be any question. She would belong to RobinClan, even if she was no use in battle.

"It's not your fault, you know," Trailblaze whispered as they headed toward the leader's oak.

Twitchpaw felt her heart turn in her chest at his words. It felt like the first time she had taken Skylark's herbs. Her mind cleared slowly, the clouds of doubts drifting away, forming a lump in her throat as her muscles eased.

"I...know," she breathed.

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The sight was the most breathtaking Twitchpaw had ever seen. She was used to the ground being far away and bushes looking like voles, but this was one of the tallest trees in the territory.

The Leap of Faith.

"Are you ready?" Splashpaw murmured. The medicine cat apprentice had insisted on jumping with the other apprentices despite it only being a half-moon since his accident. Skylark had reluctantly given him the okay right before, since his leg had pretty much healed, warning him not to jump if he didn't think he could make it. But now the dilute tortoiseshell was keeping close to the trunk, glancing at the leap anxiously. Twitchpaw pressed closer to him. The leap was scary for *anyone*, but for a cat who had literally fallen off the Great Tree in an argument with his sister, it must have been terrifying.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," she whispered back, reflecting Trailblaze's words.

Eeveepaw braced himself against the branch, narrowing his violet eyes with focus. But before he leaped, he cast a questioning look at Alderwing on the ground.

"You can go, Eeveepaw," Alderwing assured him. A rare smile crossed the calico she-cat's face. "Thank you for waiting."

Eeveepaw gave a big grin, crouching low before springing himself up with light ease. Twitchpaw felt her heart lurch. But her friend came crashing down on the branch safely, albeit rather clumsily.

Lichenpaw stepped up to the branch. She hesitated and glanced back at Splashpaw.

"Again, I'm so sorry," she murmured. The tension between the siblings seemed to have resolved slightly, and Twitchpaw guessed they had talked it out. "We're not just family, I guess. We're Clanmates, and I should have trusted you enough to do your own job."

Splashpaw didn't reply, and only twitched his tail slightly. Finally, he mewed, "Be safe, Lichenpaw."

Is it my turn? Twitchpaw's heart thudded in her chest as the ginger-and-cinnamon she-cat sprung easily to the other side, and she was hit with a wave of dizziness. But Splashpaw padded up first with a sideways grin.

"See you on the other side, Twitch."

He's really doing it. Twitchpaw had to admire his courage.

She held her breath and watched the medicine cat apprentice take the leap. She knew how he felt, and why he had to do it. He was facing his past head-on. He was proving himself as a true medicine cat. He wasn't letting his fears stop him.

And with a battle coming so soon, neither would she.

Twitchpaw gathered the strength in her legs, imagining she was a bird, about to soar freely in the sky. She remembered Trailblaze's fearlessness. Her mentor was waiting for her, cheering her on. She had an important role in the Clan.

It wasn't her fault.

Twitchpaw sucked in a deep breath and jumped.

The rush of adrenaline that charged through her body perfectly matched the wind rushing by her fur. All her fear had left, turning to strength, to lightness. For a moment, Twitchpaw couldn't see the branches ahead of her. She saw the sky, and she was flying.

Her paws hit the sturdy bark much too soon. Twitchpaw unsheathed her class, sinking them deep into the wood to keep herself from falling. Her stomach lurched, but her back paws managed to hook on a branch as she hauled herself up.

"You made it," Eeveepaw purred. He was the same familiar, friendly cat Twitchpaw had always known, but he already radiated with new confidence and maturity.

Her friend was finally a warrior.

"Stars!" Splashpaw exclaimed, pressing his fur into Tricklepaw's. His ice-blue eyes shone with relief and excitement. "That was *crazy!* Congrats, everyone!" His brother replied with a single nod, but Twitchpaw could see the delight in his blue eyes.

Lichenpaw watched without saying anything. Her eyes met with Splashpaw's.

"Get in here, Lichenpaw," Tricklepaw beckoned her in a deep voice.

Lichenpaw padded towards her siblings a little hesitantly. She paused and whispered something to Splashpaw, but Twitchpaw heard it. "I missed you—*so* much. I'll do whatever it takes to make it up to you."

Maybe Lichenpaw isn't so scary after all, Twitchpaw decided.

Chapter 19

Sparrowberry was padding along a medicine ash branch, waving her tail this way and that as Skylark tried to understand what she was saying. The warrior was better at tail signals than any other cat in the Clan, since she used them to communicate daily. Skylark was beginning to understand more and more about her.

Some days they would sometimes sit together and watch the snow fall gently through the leaf-bare branches. Sometimes, Sparrowberry would help her mix herbs. And sometimes, like now, she would 'talk' a lot and Skylark would listen, although she couldn't understand everything she was saying.

Skylark smiled as icy cold snow started to swirl in the air. Every time the weather got so magical, it was a silent sign to the two she-cats to be quiet and listen to nature and signs from WishClan. Sparrowberry glanced up, blue eyes shimmering with wonder as she and Skylark sat and watched.

It wasn't much, but it gave Skylark the most amazing feeling. Like perhaps she wasn't so different from her Clanmates after all. Like she could forget about WishClan and herbs and Darkspirits and the threat of battle looming over them all, in exchange for a beautiful sunset.

Before she knew it, the sky was turning dark and a half-moon began to appear gently in the air. *Wait, a half-moon?* Skylark jolted upright. How could she have forgotten? *The half-moon meeting!*

Sparrowberry pointed her tail at the sky, her eyes posing a question.

Skylark nodded. "I have to go to the Starspray tonight." She wondered what WishClan had to say...about the battle waiting to happen. The very thought made chills run through her fur. What if she was leading her Clan down the wrong path? Was it wise to attack first?

Sparrowberry got to her paws. Her silent smile seemed to say, *I'll still be here when you come back.*

"Thanks." Skylark felt warmth blossom in her heart despite the stormy cold. At times like these, her fears seemed to slip away.

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"I had a dream last night." Splashpaw's tail flicked thoughtfully as they started their journey to the Starspray. He limped along, his dilute tortoiseshell fur seeming to radiate new confidence after his Leap of Faith. Skylark hadn't exactly liked the risk it put on his recovery. But Splashpaw had looked at her with pleading ice-blue eyes, pacing around the medicine ash to show that he could walk, and Skylark had to admit that there wasn't *really* any reason not to let him jump with the other apprentices.

But what if he didn't recover, and I lost him? Skylark shoved the thought to the back of her mind. Her apprentice was here now. He was safe. He wasn't about to leave her.

"Oakstar talked to me," Splashpaw continued. "He said to understand why Claystar isn't willing to budge."

"Because he's a jerk," Skylark found herself growling. The dark ginger tom had once taught RobinClan the warrior code, and now he and MarshClan were stealing from them.

Splashpaw shook his head. "I think he does want the best for MarshClan...even if he is very jerk-y about it." He gazed up at Skylark with hope in his ice-blue gaze. "But we aren't going to be driven out."

"How are you so sure?" They were striding up to the bank now, as the other medicine cats shook out their fur, spraying water among the tall grass.

Splashpaw purred. "It's just like Lichenpaw said. Our different strengths will help us survive this flood, too." The way he talked about his sister held no bitterness; it seemed like he had truly forgiven her. She thought about how Vix had promised to look out

for them, how Alderwing, despite everything, was every bit as brave as her sister. How Sparrowberry and Vixenpool didn't hesitate to help her. And even how Twitchpaw, the young she-cat, was carving her way through the Clan by caring about other cats.

The air was cool and soft around the Starspray. But unlike last time at the half-moon meeting, the wind was chilly and frosty. The snow was so thick she could barely feel the stony ground beneath her paws. Skylark shivered against the chill; the last leaf-bare, she had been curled up on an alleyway heater. But it wasn't just the weather that was different. *Our last half-moon meeting before the battle,* Skylark thought. Sparkstar had told the Clan that they were going to launch an attack at dawn. *How are we supposed to talk to Scruffyheart and Hurricanepaw as if our Clans aren't at war with each other?*

Avalanchefall padded up to the rocky path beside the Starspray, expression melting into joy as he caught sight of Skylark and Splashpaw. A jolt of excitement ran through her at seeing her friend again, although the feeling wasn't as desperate as it once had been. Avalanchefall used to be her only friend. Now she had her Clanmates too. Somehow it made her even happier to meet the fluffy white cat again.

"Hey, you're still wearing that!" Avalanchefall pointed out the poppy she was wearing in her shoulder fur as he bounded toward them.

Through everything that had happened, Skylark had never forgotten the tom who first showed her true friendship. She purred, looking up at him. "I never forgot our time together."

"Neither did I," Avalanchefall smiled. Skylark wondered if she meant as much to him as he did to her. She was sure he had friends before she came along—but she liked to believe there was something special between them anyway.

They didn't have to wait long for the other medicine cats to arrive. Juniperberry slunk towards them, her calico pelt melting into the shadows, eyes alert as she slid onto the path beside them. She dipped her head to Skylark, Splashpaw, and Avalanchefall. "Nice to see you all again."

"Hi, Avalanchefall!" Hurricanepaw yelped, scrambling toward them. "Splashpaw! Are you better now?"

"Yes," Splashpaw purred. Hurricanepaw padded around him, happily welcoming him back.

"It's good to see you again, buddy!" Scruffyheart smiled. The fluffy grey tom touched noses with Avalanchefall, purring as he wove around Juniperberry. *Scruffyheart is from MarshClan, but he's our fellow medicine cat...* The brown-patched she-cat decided to break the ice. "Does anyone know what herbs are good for battles?"

"Marigold, horsetail, comfrey root..." Juniperberry began listing all the herbs, though the calico shot Skylark a questioning look. Scruffyheart was shuffling his paws awkwardly at the side. Hurricanepaw took the chance to leap to her paws, gaze darting between her mentor and the RobinClan cats.

Scruffyheart took a few steps closer, his smile fading as he did. "You guys look...really thin," he mumbled.

An awkward silence passed between the cats as Skylark wondered what to say to the MarshClan tom. "Yeah, we kind of are."

Scruffyheart blinked at her unintentionally bitter words. "I-I'm sorry..." He ducked his wide head.

Just then, a surge of anger suddenly jolted through her. She stepped back, realising that his Clan was the part of the reason they were struggling. *After we helped them so much with our catmint!* Skylark bristled, betrayal building inside her, fueled by her empty stomach. "I can't believe you're stealing from us. Don't you know how harsh leaf-bare is? We gave you our catmint. Give us back our prey."

The dark grey tom stepped back in shock. "I can't. You weren't around last leaf-bare, but..." Scruffyheart shook his head. "We lost cats from hunger and cold. We can't afford for that to happen again."

The dream flashed in Skylark's mind through her outburst, catching her off-guard. "Was a small brown she-cat one of them?" she

suggested cautiously.

Scruffyheart's amber eyes widened in surprise. "Sandfern?" he murmured, his voice tinted with grief. "Yes, she was Claystar's mate."

Did that mean she had been in *Claystar's* memory? That matched his behaviour in her first vision and when she had talked to him- though she now realised that it rubbed her the wrong way. Was that why none of the patrols Sparkstar sent out seemed to change his mind?

Splashpaw stepped forward to meet Scruffyheart. "I don't know if we're allowed to tell you," the young tom breathed. "But well, we need our land back. Maybe keep your eyes out, and please be safe, okay?"

Scruffyheart tilted his head, letting out a tired huff. "You couldn't be any more ominous, could you?"

Skylark hadn't understood the need to fight when they first came to the forest. But now she was supporting it, launching the battle preparation into action. Warmth flowed into her as she thought about Splashpaw. Chasecloud, who she had helped with kitting, and the kits who had raced her for the scraggly, half-frozen lump of moss. Sparrowberry's trusting blue eyes. Twitchpaw's fear and her desperate determination to keep the Clan together. It had to happen if she wanted RobinClan to stay together.

That's what a medicine cat does.

But she couldn't forget her friend. Some of her anger melted away as she looked back at the grey tom and dipped her head to him. "Stay safe."

Looking at her friend, Skylark genuinely didn't think he wanted to drive them out for good. Avalanchefall touched Skylark's pelt with his tail gently, looking torn between his two friends. "SnowyClan will back you up if you need," he promised Skylark.

Juniperberry stepped closer to the pool of water sparkling in the

leaf-bare starlight, back facing the other cats. "Let's not waste any more moonlight. We are here to share with WishClan after all." The CavernClan cat's tail rippled as she stepped into the water. Skylark looked at her admiringly. CavernClan cats were most skilled at battle, but their generally kind nature kept them from often getting caught in them.

Alongside her apprentice, Skylark followed the calico into the water. Cold water lapped at her fur as she paddled toward the great splashing waterfall to join a cringing Juniperberry. Skylark twitched her ears empathetically toward her, though she couldn't help smiling. Sharing with WishClan was always exciting.

Once all of them were standing underneath the Starspray, rushing water pounding Skylark's pelt, she closed her eyes and let the spray drown out all other noises. It felt like reaching for a Darkspirit; as if reaching for shadows instead of light. Fog, instead of the warm amber and turquoise land, greeted her.

"Hello?" Skylark called, but the only response was the whipping of wind in her ears. That was weird—the ghost was always there. She padded around, sniffing for any traces of him—but then she remembered that Darkspirits didn't have a scent. The thought made a shiver run through her fur.

After what seemed like forever, a dark shape crept into view. "Ah. You're here," the Darkspirit mewed.

"What took so long?" Splashpaw's voice came from beside her. Skylark realised with a jolt that her apprentice was there. *We're sharing the same dream!*

The Darkspirit gave a low, rumbly purr. "I think you know there's no way I'm a RobinClan cat. I have free roam of...well, everywhere."

"Does that mean you were visiting your Clan?" Skylark guessed. "Is it MarshClan?" From what the Darkspirit had shown her, that seemed like the most obvious one. But then why was he hanging around in RobinClan territory so often?

The Darkspirit dipped his head. "You're right. And after watching

you for so long, I finally remember."

Skylark was puzzled, but she leaned forward eagerly. Maybe this was the final piece of what they would have to do.

The scene darkened, then cleared into brightness again. Skylark was walking in a swamp-like territory, her paws mindlessly pulling out herbs. A numbness filled her chest. *There's nothing I can do,* she repeated to herself, the words both heavy and freeing.

A flash caught her eye. A rustle in the reeds, a low hiss. Skylark whipped around in shock. "Who's there?"

Suddenly a dark ginger tabby rushed out of the ferns, and before she knew it, his paws were around her throat. She struggled under the cat's grasp, but his grip was powerful. Skylark squinted, choking, to get a glimpse of her attacker.

Cloudy blue eyes flashed against the dank marsh.

Claystar.

Then she was jerked back to the present, the scene before her reforming. She gasped for breath as her throat loosened. The familiar ginger tabby shape of Claystar took form, but this time he seemed to be alone, pacing in a reed den.

"An attack, that's what they're planning," Claystar growled to himself. His tail flicked behind him thoughtfully. "It's leaf-bare now, so we have every right to hunt on their territory. But Sparkstar is already so suspicious that his warriors are planning an ambush any day now."

Skylark stiffened. Claystar was right—Sparkstar had sent patrols as far as the edge of the marsh to scout the area.

"I am *not* risking my cats for a bunch of cats who don't know when to attack. I agreed to them living in the forest because we're still allowed to hunt there! And now they're planning a *battle?*" His clouded blue eyes gazed frustratedly at the roof of the den. "Was it not enough that Sandfern and Pearpaw *died*, Oakstar? I wish I could talk to you now. I'm playing it smart. No cat will ever die from

hunger ever again." The dark ginger tabby flicked his tail back and forth, and he bowed his head. For a moment Skylark felt sorry for Claystar, with his shoulders hunched over like that.

Until the leader snapped his head up again. "So they're planning a battle, huh," he snarled. "I always knew four Clans in the forest would bring trouble. Well, I'm going to attack *first*. Drive them out of this forest for good so they can never cause trouble to my cats again." Claystar's pelt prickled at his spine, making Skylark shiver from the tension in his expression. "This rag-tag bunch of rogues and kittypets will run back to their Twolegs faster than a mouse!"

Eyes flashing, the MarshClan leader marched out of the den.

Skylark's heart beat wildly in her chest as the scene faded. This wasn't something she and Splashpaw could solve. They needed to warn RobinClan.

The Darkspirit gave them a look, or Skylark assumed he did, as his shape was as dark and mysterious as always. "I knew he would go down this path eventually. Don't bother helping me anymore. Help yourselves."

"Why are you on our side?" Skylark questioned, her heart racing. "Didn't you say you were a MarshClan cat?"

The Darkspirit went silent for a moment. "I was their medicine cat," he meowed deeply. "I never agreed with Claystar, but I never thought..."

"Are you saying—" Splashpaw's ice-blue eyes sharpened with realisation and horror. "Are you—him?"

"I think your apprentice has figured it out." The Darkspirit bowed his head to the medicine cats, *fellow* medicine cats, Skylark realised. But she was far from prepared for what the ghost cat said next. The words chilled her to the bone.

"My name is Mallowsight. Claystar was the one who killed me."

Chapter 20

Twitchpaw watched Misteswoop and Puddlesoar share prey with Stormfall in the dim pre-dawn light. The three cats had been former rogues, and Twitchpaw had always felt her stomach grow hollow when close to them.

Mediator. She rolled the word of her new role around in her head.

Trailblaze greeted her with a flick of his tail. He was gasping for air, and she guessed he had been practising sparring. *With cats who aren't me,* she thought with a pang.

"Moss ball for your thoughts?" he joked. "You can go back to sleep, you know. We aren't training today."

Twitchpaw let out a sigh. "I got the role that I wanted. Why does it still feel so wrong?"

Trailblaze sharpened his claws against the trunk of the birch tree. "I guess we're all a little on edge."

Twitchpaw's gaze drifted over her mentor. "Are you...disappointed? That all your training has gone to waste?"

Trailblaze narrowed his eyes as a short silence paused, only the sound of his claws scratching the bark. "A little," he admitted. "But I went through the same thing when I switched from defender to a warrior. Warrior life is SO much more fun." His amber eyes glazed over, and Twitchpaw knew he was thinking about Crowpelt and Laurelcall. "Though...I didn't realise how distant I became."

Twitchpaw looked at him. "I don't want you or Eeveepaw or *anyone* to be upset about this." She had to admit, that was a big reason why she had stayed in warrior training for so long. "You were the best mentor I could have asked for."

"Really?" Trailblaze's whiskers lifted in an astonished smile. "Well,

that's the best compliment I've heard all day, from the best apprentice in RobinClan."

Twitchpaw stared at him, a wave of shock passing over her. *Did he just say that?* "What about Eeveepaw?" she whispered.

"You think I'd rather have him as an apprentice over you?" Trailblaze's eyes widened before his voice collapsed into a purr.

"He's not afraid of fighting," Twitchpaw pointed out, a little embarrassed.

Trailblaze shook his head. "It doesn't *matter* that you don't like to fight. I wouldn't either if I had a kithood like yours." He shuddered. "You're observant and hardworking all the same, and very kind." Twitchpaw couldn't believe her ears as he told her, "I told you, I'm honoured to be your mentor."

He let the words sink in for a moment. Warmth sunk into her grey fur, lighting her up. Somehow, she believed him. Twitchpaw had never thought she would be so lucky. "Thank you," she mewed softly.

Her mentor winked. "Wouldn't say it if it weren't true! But–" He swished his tail in a familiar gesture, checking in one last time.

She knew he was talking about the battle. Twitchpaw stared at her paws, dragging a claw against the branch below her. There was still something nagging at her thoughts. "If we're planning a battle...aren't we just as bad as those rogues?"

Trailblaze glanced at her, seeming shocked. "Hold on. *Why* were those rogues fighting, back in Twolegplace?"

Twitchpaw thought about it. Then she remembered why she had tried *not* to think about it. The helplessness from that day still haunted her like a shadow. The same helplessness she felt when Splashpaw fell out of Sunningtree.

"No, it's okay," Trailblaze murmured. "You can do it. I think you *need* to, or it'll stay with you forever."

Twitchpaw closed her eyes. Maybe he was right. The image of the dark alley enfolded her, as she watched herself—as a kit—padding curiously along. Laughing, sinister eyes were all around. Cats with ragged pelts circled each other, pouncing and clawing each other. And most cats were watching with glinting eyes.

Twitchpaw had whined, and a host of sharp gazes turned on her. "A new competitor!" some cat had crowed sinisterly. "Come along, young kit."

Terror had exploded in her chest as she fled, trying to escape. She sensed cats chasing her—like housecats chasing their shiny new toy. She ran and ran, fleeing into the shadows. Forcing herself to blend in so she wouldn't be caught.

A Twoleg had walked up to her, but she was too paralyzed by fear to even care.

And then she woke up in that big Twoleg nest, surrounded by other cats.

Twitchpaw opened her eyes, panting heavily. "They were hurting each other...for fun," she realised. "It was a game to them."

"Were they anything like us?" Trailblaze questioned.

Twitchpaw shook her head as guilt released its grip on her heart. "They meant nothing to each other. They weren't fighting to protect their home or each other." She sighed with relief. She wasn't like the rogues—none of her friends were.

Trailblaze's expression glowed with satisfaction. "And you have a special role too." He swept his tail across the branch, spilling dried leaves everywhere. "You're already a natural at mediating." He purred. "The Clan is going to need to be at its very best if we're going to win this battle, so maybe you can help with that."

It was the best thing Twitchpaw ever could have hoped for. Creating peace instead of fighting? Helping her Clan through their first battle in a special way? Twitchpaw always hoped RobinClan would be some sort of *family*. Sparkstar had been the first sign in

her life that maybe she could have cats around her who she didn't need to be afraid of. But she never thought that *she* would be the one to help them get there.

Thank you, she signed.

Just then, Skylark hurried up to them. She greeted them with a polite dip of her head. "Twitchpaw, I hear you're the new mediator." The medicine cat's brown-tipped tail flicked behind her. "I'd like to talk to you."

Wondering why, Twitchpaw mewed a goodbye to her mentor and followed Skylark. The battle *was* planned to start soon. Maybe they would need to discuss that?

The she-cats arrived at the leaders' oak. Vixenpool stood beside Sparkstar, her short fur fluffed up against the cold wind. Twitchpaw felt a surge of self-doubt course through her body. What was she doing *here*, among the most important Clan cats? Eeveepaw would explode with joy if he was in her position.

But then she caught sight of Splashpaw, who gave her a sweet, albeit confused, smile.

Sparkstar sighed, letting her know there had already been a conversation before she got there. "So Claystar knows about our plans? He wants to attack first?"

Twitchpaw blinked in surprise, but Skylark nodded solemnly. "We need to be prepared."

"And come up with a backup plan," Sparkstar added. His gaze shifted to Twitchpaw. "In case we don't win."

The words cast dread into Twitchpaw's heart. After all, RobinClan had only been warriors for a few moons.

Splashpaw moved closer to Twitchpaw to whisper to her. "How come you're here?"

The grey apprentice shuffled her front paws together self-consciously. "I'm...the Clan's new mediator."

"Whoa!" Splashpaw tilted his head, eyes shining with admiration.

Vixenpool gave Twitchpaw her usual warm smile. "Are you up to mediating for us if anything goes wrong?" She curled her white tail around her legs as if trying to comfort herself at the possibility.

"I don't know..." Twitchpaw might have mediated small disagreements in RobinClan, but *between* Clans? With one that was desperate to drive them out? "I'll try?"

"You'll do great!" Splashpaw assured her. Twitchpaw purred, grateful for her friend's support. Eeveepaw had always trained beside her, but Splashpaw was someone she could always count on.

"We might not be the ones fighting," Skylark meowed, "But I have herbs ready. And Splashpaw and I have seen some...visions." She shot a glance at Twitchpaw. "We'll fill you in later. If fighting doesn't give MarshClan the message, we might have information that can get to the root of it."

Twitchpaw nodded slowly as she took the medicine cat's words in. *WishClan must have revealed something to them.*

Sparkstar padded up the Highbranch, inhaling deeply before yowling, "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather under the Highbranch for a Clan meeting!"

Twitchpaw watched her Clanmates stream out of their trees sleepily, save for the few who had been up early. Creekstorm yawned, her black fur rippling along her back. "It's too early for this."

"Speak for yourself," Chasecloud responded with a flick of her tail. "I could hardly sleep at all!"

Sparkstar quietened the gathered cats with a raise of his head. "There has been a change in plan," he announced. "MarshClan somehow knows about our attack. They are planning a counter, so our priority is to defend the camp." The leader motioned to the defenders. Lichenpaw raised her head, eyes shining with determination. Flashflood and Laurelcall exchanged glances, while

Eggnogshine huddled closer to Kiteheart and Crowpelt nervously.

"Squishypelt, Moosebloom, Vixenpool, Puddlesoar," Sparkstar continued. "Scout the territory and keep watch. Alert the camp immediately for signs of attack. Trailblaze, Sparrowberry, Kestrelflame, Tricklepaw. You four can start the attack we originally had planned. The rest of you, go with them or stay in camp for backup." Twitchpaw saw Tricklepaw's face light up.

Eeveepaw glanced up at Alderwing. "Shall we go with?"

"The Clan might need backup later into the fight," his mentor reasoned. "Better be fresh and ready if that happens. But I'm not stopping you."

Eeveepaw seemed to consider it for a moment, before shrugging. "Okay."

"Maybe some of us can get some rest," Creekstorm murmured.

Once the meeting was over, the cats dispersed into their groups. Dustkit was the first to greet her as Twitchpaw headed down the leader's tree. "Twitchpaw! HI!"

"Hey, Dusty." Twitchpaw purred at the kit's friendliness. "And Rainy. How are you both?"

"Good! Mom tried to teach us some battle moves, but Stormfall's stories are so cool! I wish I could go on adventures too." Rainkit leaped up excitedly. "Is there going to be a battle today?"

"There is," Kiteheart confirmed to his kits.

"I know battles all too well," Stormfall added darkly. "I wish I could fight alongside Puddlesoar and Mistleswoop again, like the old days." His blue-grey paws twitched restlessly.

Mistleswoop paused, wrapping her spiky-furred tail around her mate's father. "You've done plenty already," she assured him briefly. "We've got this. We'll win for you." Seeing the former rogue reassuring the elder surprised Twitchpaw a bit. *They act nothing like the rogues in that alley.*

"For RobinClan!" Dustkit cried, scraping up leaves and bits of bark in her eagerness.

Twitchpaw's eyes trailed over to the other elder nearby. She noticed his pelt was spiked as he glanced at her and took a step back instinctively.

"Why does there have to be a battle?" Miloheart rasped, his brow furrowed in a frown. "Vix wouldn't let it happen. Who are we fighting?"

Twitchpaw's heart softened with empathy. "We're only defending RobinClan, I promise. Even if we don't, MarshClan is already planning a counterattack...the warriors are just trying to protect everyone."

"Attack?" Miloheart's green eyes sparked with panic. "Here?"

Twitchpaw hesitated for a beat before pressing her pelt to the old tom's comfortingly. Small touches from her friends always calmed her down. "The warriors and defenders are getting ready to counter-attack. The MarshClan cats won't even get close to the camp." *At least I hope so.*

"She's right," Skylark meowed, leaping down to join them. Twitchpaw jumped at the sound of the medicine cat's voice. "We'll be protecting you both and the kits with our lives."

Dustkit charged at Skylark, darting around her. "We don't need protecting!"

Mistleswoop stared at the kit sternly. "You are still kits. You'd better stay in the elders' den with Stormfall and Miloheart, okay?" As Dustkit's tail drooped, Twitchpaw trailed her tail along the kit's fur, meeting her gaze with a smile. Her eyes were as electric blue as Chasecloud's. "Soon, little ones," she whispered.

Skylark beckoned Twitchpaw, turning to the main part of camp. Patrols were already being sent out. "It's close," the medicine cat whispered.

Twitchpaw followed her to the Great Tree. There were a few limp

squirrels in the fresh-kill hole, but she couldn't even think about eating. Her nerves were knotting in her belly, heart fluttering in her chest.

"Before we go into...whatever this is," she heard Laurelcall murmur, gazing into Flashflood's forest-green eyes. The noble tom's gaze was soft as kitten's fur as he touched his nose to the other defender's. The dark ginger she-cat's eyes widened, but she didn't pull back. "You and Eggnogshine have been like family to me. This probably goes without saying, but...I love you, Flashflood! I can't go another moment without saying it!"

Flashflood ducked her head, covering her face with a front paw. "Stop, we're in public." But the calico shifted closer, letting her pelt brush against the tom's.

Laurelcall's purr was muffled as he buried his muzzle in the defender's dark ginger fur. Flashflood's head rested on his white fur for a sweet moment before they pulled out from their embrace.

Chapter 21

Skylark shifted awkwardly, a bundle of herbs in her jaws as she hid beside Twitchpaw and Splashpaw behind a sheltered bush. After filling the new mediator in about what had happened in MarshClan the previous leaf-bare, especially about Sandfern and Mallowsight, they now crouched waiting in case any cat needed their help.

"MarshClan spotted!" Squishypelt yowled. Sure enough, a patrol of warriors led by Bayfur was running towards RobinClan territory.

Sparrowberry flicked her tail at Trailblaze. *Stay down. I'll go to the left.* Her mate nodded, dropping to the snow and steering right.

Skylark admired her friend. She would never be brave enough to race into battle the same way. *Please be safe.*

"Where are those RobinClan cats?" a spotted grey she-cat wondered, looking around with narrowed eyes. Skylark felt a pang as she remembered that it was Ashleaf, one of the cats they had helped to treat. But Twitchpaw inhaled sharply beside her. "That's one of the cats Eeveepaw and I saw hunting near the training tree."

Trailblaze launched himself into the air. He swung from a branch, landing with outstretched claws onto the she-cat. Ashleaf seemed caught off guard, but quickly recovered, sliding underneath the ginger-and-white tom's belly and leaping away. The battle had started. Sparrowberry lashed out a claw at a golden tom, who let out a low growl as they rolled into a wrestle.

Kestrelflame and Tricklepaw sprung into the wrestle on the ground from high in the trees, catching a silver tabby by surprise. Down on the floor, Sparrowberry seemed to be gesturing towards Puddlesoar, Vixenpool, Moosebloom, and Squishypelt with swift tail signals. The RobinClan cats seemed to be moving in sync, jumping and twisting in their own scuffles. A rush of pride for her friend glowed in Skylark's heart.

"They have the trees, darn it," Bayfur hissed as Puddlesoar escaped upwards before the MarshClan deputy could rake his claws across his muzzle.

From the direction of camp, Skylark heard Chasecloud and Lichenpaw yowling with the bravery of eagles. *Another patrol?* She squinted to make out their shapes. The defender apprentice was just as nimble as her Clanmate as she leaped from a branch above to strike at a she-cat. Chasecloud's pelt was a blur; Skylark knew she was fighting for Kiteheart and her kits.

"Lichenpaw...." Splashpaw dug his claws into the ground worriedly. "I hope no cat gets seriously injured."

"I don't think that's likely," Skylark murmured as she watched the battle unfold under the falling snow. Splashpaw gave her a look and sighed. "Yeah. Mallowsight showed us: Claystar wants us gone, doesn't he?"

"All for some cursed prey." Skylark meowed sadly. How could WishClan stand by and watch this happen? Lynxbranch said she would help them, but where was she now? The brown-patched she-cat looked to the sky. Snow had begun to fall, stinging her pelt with cold air. Somehow the white flurry reminded her of Avalanchefall. It would have been beautiful without the yowling of battle in the background.

"I have a feeling WishClan wants us to settle this peacefully," Skylark meowed, almost to herself.

"Yeah, me too." Splashpaw flicked his tail with anticipation as he exchanged a look with Twitchpaw.

Just then, another wave of MarshClan cats seemed to appear out of nowhere. Panic sparked as Skylark realised that their cats were overpowered. "We need to call for backup!" She beckoned her apprentice with her tail, but he was already by her side. Just like he always was. She smiled, realising how grateful she was for him. Avalanchefall had changed her life, and Splashpaw had only continued to, becoming one of her closest Clanmates. Twitchpaw only seemed glad to get out of the heat of battle.

"Follow me," Twitchpaw whispered. The grey she-cat slipped out of the bushes, easily finding dips in the grass and shrubs to hide behind as Skylark and Splashpaw followed.

"What are you guys doing here?" Laurelcall was posted in front of the Great Tree, his back arched and chest heaving. His white fur was scratched up, and blood trickled from the defender's ear.

"We need backup," Twitchpaw explained anxiously. The defender's eyes widened and he pointed his muzzle upwards. "Run up to camp."

Skylark had never seen the friendly tom look so distressed before. Kiteheart and Eggnogshine were guarding the nursery willow, while Crowpelt and Flashflood fought off MarshClan cats trying to claw their way to camp.

"Eeveepaw!" Splashpaw's voice was filled with relief as he spotted his friend. "Hurry; we need a patrol at the border!"

Eeveepaw jumped to his paws. Alderwing, Creekstorm, and Mistleswoop flanked him, their ears pricked and alert. "We'll go," he replied.

Twitchpaw stepped forward to nuzzle Eeveepaw. "Good luck. I'll see you when this is all over."

The brown apprentice gave his usual smirk in return. "Catch you later," he purred, rubbing his fur reassuringly against both Twitchpaw and Splashpaw.

Just as the patrol left, Splashpaw let out a squeak of shock as he was pushed to the side. "L-Lichenpaw?!" The medicine cat apprentice struggled under his sister's grasp.

"Stay down!" Lichepaw lashed out at a brown tabby, who Skylark realised with horror had been targeting her apprentice. The defender apprentice swiped at the tom, which he dodged easily and sunk his claws into her fur. Lichenpaw pressed her lips together, green eyes faltering in pain.

The ginger and brown she-cat spread her legs out, arching her back

in a defensive stance. She leaped out of his grasp, tufts of her fur falling as she did, landing squarely on the tabby's back. "Don't you dare hurt my brother," she hissed, swiping a paw to unbalance him. The MarshClan cat slipped and clung onto the branch with his front paws.

"Run!" Lichenpaw yowled.

They didn't need to be told twice. Blood roared in Skylark's ears as they fled towards the medicine ash.

A few moments later, Lichenpaw shuffled towards them, her pelt dripping with blood. The tension that hung in the air was thicker than a bramble thicket.

"You—saved my life," Splashpaw murmured finally.

Lichenpaw flicked her tail, her eyes filled with pain though a smile curled her muzzle. "I–told you—I'd make it up to you..."

The dilute tortoiseshell's eyes became glossy. He turned away, quickly grabbing moss soaked with marigold poultices they had prepared earlier and applying it to his sister's fur. She sighed with exhaustion, dropping to the branch.

"Rest," Splashpaw ordered, only his eyes betraying his worry. "You're in no state to go back out there right now."

Lichenpaw looked like she was about to protest, but closed her eyes in resignation. "Thank you, brother..."

"No, thank *you* for saving me." Splashpaw rubbed the poultice gently on her fur, before looking up at Skylark. "I can stay here and look after anyone who's badly injured. My leg sort of hurts from all that running around anyway."

Skylark was reminded of how thankful she was for her competent, faithful apprentice. She dipped her head to him, blinking gratefully.

"Hate to interrupt," Twitchpaw mewed hesitantly, "but I don't think we're winning." Skylark followed the she-cat's line of sight, a shudder of dread rippling her white and brown fur. Despite

RobinClan's best efforts, Twitchpaw had a point. They had the element of surprise, but it didn't seem enough to counter the more experienced MarshClan warriors.

"What do we do?" she mused aloud.

Twitchpaw let out a strained purr. "I don't know, usually I just help cats get together to talk about the issue and let them work it out. But I'm not sure if Claystar will relent, even if Sparkstar talks to him..."

Skylark looked up to the clouds like she always did during uncertainty. The bare branches overhead were backed by a thick cluster of clouds. Then suddenly, it was like the clouds had parted, the answer falling into her mind like snowfall. "Maybe Sparkstar isn't the one Claystar has to talk to," she murmured. "Maybe it's WishClan."

Twitchpaw tilted her head, brow slightly lifted with confusion. But Splashpaw jumped up, nodding in agreement. "Claystar said he lost cats to the harsh leaf-bare! If he could talk to them again, maybe he'll find some sense." His blue eyes flashed sharply to Skylark. "I think that includes Mallowsight, too."

Twitchpaw flicked her tail rapidly from side to side. "We're pinning our hopes on...long-dead ghost cats?"

Skylark had almost forgotten how not all of RobinClan believed in their warrior ancestors. "They said they would help me...help *us*." She met the grey she-cat's green eyes. "Trust me."

Twitchpaw sighed. "It's as good an idea as any."

After taking an extra leaf-wrap just in case, Skylark and Twitchpaw slipped down the trees with much more care than usual. The yowling of battle crashed around her as Skylark darted past. Mistleswoop and Chasecloud were wrestling bravely together with a ginger tom. Mistleswoop's missing leg didn't seem to slow her down at all as she guarded Chasecloud's back.

As they passed back towards Bigroots, Skylark saw Kestrelflame and

Tricklepaw's eyes lit with intense fire. A cream tom had Eeveepaw pinned to the ground while the RobinClan apprentice struggled beneath his long legs. Skylark had no idea how to help. All she could do was to take note of injuries that she could treat later on. But Tricklepaw charged over and knocked the MarshClan apprentice off his paws with a swift leap.

"Thanks, Tricklepaw!" Eeveepaw gasped as he scrambled to his paws.

The fawn tom dipped his head in acknowledgement, before diving headfirst into a wrestle with the tom.

Nearby Alderwing was fighting a light brown tom. He was definitely winning—despite the calico she-cat's best efforts, the tom was stockier and heavier than her by a few fox-tails. Just then, another blur of dark ginger fur appeared as Flashflood came to her sister's rescue. The light brown tom looked incredibly confused, eyes darting between the two littermates like he was seeing double. Skylark might have purred with amusement if the situation allowed. She had almost forgotten how similar Alderwing and Flashflood looked at first glance, with their tortoiseshell coats, white paws, and green eyes.

Twitchpaw suddenly dashed into a bit of undergrowth. Skylark followed, wondering what she had found, before drawing back as the metallic smell of blood entered her nose.

Sparkstar was in a mangled ball of claws, teeth and fur with Claystar. The cats were rolling around and striking with powerful blows. But Sparkstar's fur was matted and dripping with blood, while Claystar finally stood tall over him. "Do you get the message, kittypet?" the dark ginger leader snarled. It was a shock, having seen him in dreams and *walking in his memories*, and now he was in their territory. "Leave my cats alone! You said we could hunt on your territory!"

Twitchpaw's breath was quickening and her ears pressed firmly to her head. Skylark glanced towards her, unsure what to do. *I don't have juniper berries for her now!*

Just then, Sparkstar staggered over to them, breathing heavily. Claystar seemed to be gone. The lithe black-and-white tom crept past the ferns, collapsing in front of Skylark.

The medicine cat shook her head slightly as she unravelled her leaf-wrap of herbs. *The cat who trained us to be warriors in the first place.* She grabbed marigold and cobwebs and hurriedly began licking Sparkstar's wounds. Splashpaw joined her, applying the paste swiftly on the leader's black-and-white fur.

"Sparkstar," Skylark meowed. "We can't go on like this. No matter how hard we fight, MarshClan cats have still been warriors for longer than us. They aren't going to back down."

The RobinClan leader narrowed his yellow-green eyes, tensing for a moment. Twitchpaw stepped forward, her voice calm though her grey pelt bristled at the sight of the injured tom. "We have a plan. We're going to talk to Claystar and try to stop this peacefully. Somehow."

Sparkstar prickled his fur uncomfortably along his back, wincing when Splashpaw placed cobwebs over his fur. "I've sent patrols to talk to him so many times, and he's just as stubborn as ever." The leader heaved a painful sigh of resignation. "He's not like Oakstar at all."

Twitchpaw gave Sparkstar an empathetic look while Skylark jumped up excitedly. "We have WishClan on our side now," she explained with a purr. "They promised to help us. But...we'll do it only if you agree to stop the battle."

Sparkstar's eyes darted to the fighting cats, his expression clearly showing that he didn't want to give up their plan yet. "RobinClan is strong..."

"But not strong enough." Twitchpaw finished softly. The young grey she-cat shifted her paws in the grass. "This may be the only way we can win." She gazed up at Skylark, who nodded in confirmation.

Sparkstar dipped his head reluctantly. He got to his paws as Skylark finished treating his major wounds. A wave of relief that he had

agreed flooded the medicine cat—no way she was letting him go back into battle like that. But now he didn't have to.

With Twitchpaw by her side and Splashpaw healing their Clanmates in camp, she knew that WishClan had given them all they needed to defend their home. RobinClan wasn't going to lose what they had travelled so long and hard to find. A perfect place for Dustkit and Rainkit to grow up in. Something like a vision rang in her brain: her, Sparrowberry, and Vixenpool, lying on Sunningtree's warm branches. Splashpaw and Twitchpaw, all the rest of the Clan. The promising newleaf vision that Lynxbranch had shown her.

And Skylark had to thank Avalanchefall for opening her eyes to see it.

She whispered a call for the fluffy white tom, somewhere far enough that borders didn't matter. Skylark leaped into the air alongside Twitchpaw, darting back towards the heart of the battle.

Chapter 22

Twitchpaw was running.

She darted alongside Skylark, feeling her muscles stretch and contract effortlessly after moons of training with Trailblaze. Fierce battle cries and howls of pain echoed around her, and she had to remind herself not to let fear overtake her mind.

Twitchpaw caught sight of Eeveepaw fighting off Tanglepaw alongside Alderwing. Her heart warmed at the sight of her friend. He was so amazing—and here he was, a fighter in his own right. The grey she-cat decided to take a risk and slipped in to whisper to him. "You're doing fantastic," Twitchpaw mewed into his ear, making sure her grey pelt melted into the shadows painted on the snowbanks. She must have looked like no more than a grey blur. Eeveepaw didn't respond, but his ears flicked back. He had heard her. "Hang in there—we're going to stop this, Eevee."

She slipped away before any MarshClan cats could spot her, her pelt sparking with adrenaline and satisfaction. Her skills at hiding from kithood were proving useful. Twitchpaw searched the cats for a familiar ginger and white pelt. Trailblaze was licking at his wounds at the side. She saw a ginger apprentice approaching him and quickly signalled, *Watch out!* Trailblaze blinked as he saw the sign, turning his head just in time to duck out of the way.

"Sparrowberry! Oh no—" She heard Skylark cry. The dark ginger she-cat was lying on the ground further up, a blurry shape splayed out in bright red-stained snow. The medicine cat sprinted towards her friend, unwrapping the leaf wrap urgently.

Twitchpaw's throat tightened and she had to look away. As she glanced around the dense forest, she could see Moosebloom helping a limping Vixenpool towards a row of bushes. Then a flash of orange-and-white fur—Trailblaze pinned to the earth by cream MarshClan she-cat. He was gasping and his face was contorted in a defiant, spitting expression. Chills ran through her fur.

I need to help my mentor! Twitchpaw gathered her strength. She couldn't bear to harm any cat, but maybe she could get the cat who had taught her so much out of there. She closed her eyes, imagining herself charging towards the rogues in that alley so long ago. Not a kit anymore, but a Clan cat. Memory merged with reality as she saw Trailblaze in the damp alley, pinned down by vicious rogues. She expected fear to overcome her.

But it didn't. This was *anger.*

How *dare* these cats hurt him.

Twitchpaw slipped into the shadows of a tree, knowing that she couldn't be seen. *But it's not time for hiding anymore.*

With a leap, Twitchpaw felt her paws slam into the she-cat, but the MarshClan cat didn't even twitch an ear. Twitchpaw hissed as she jumped, using a branch overhead to slingshot herself into the cat. She watched the cat's expression melt into confusion as she pushed her paws, with sheathed claws, away from her mentor. Remembering her training, Twitchpaw flicked her tail, pretending to signal to another cat in the distance.

To her surprise, it worked. She released her grip on Trailblaze's throat and turned behind. Twitchpaw took the chance and darted toward her mentor.

"Twitchpaw?" the warrior choked out. "What—are you—"

"You need to get to Skylark!" Twitchpaw noticed a long gash splitting his ginger fur.

Suddenly, a sleek black figure flashed before her eyes. Twitchpaw flinched, bracing herself for an attack. But the cat turned and crashed on the MarshClan cat instead. As her vision cleared, Twitchpaw heaved a sigh of relief. It was Crowpelt!

The defender dipped his head to Trailblaze. "Laurel said you needed help? I'd fight along with you," he meowed. "But Twitchpaw's right. I'll take care of these fox-hearts."

"Crow—" Trailblaze's amber eyes softened as he gazed at his old

friend.

"My turn to save you." Crowpelt turned his head back with a slight grin.

Skylark nudged Twitchpaw with his shoulder. "Claystar," she hissed. Her muzzle pointed at a dark ginger figure that made her fur prick and tremble involuntarily. *Claystar.* It was almost unthinkable that he had been the one to train them, but that was when Oakstar had still been MarshClan's leader.

Skylark blinked at her gently. "Are you ready, Twitchpaw? You're the mediator."

"I..." Twitchpaw shook, her heart thrumming in her chest. The bravery she had felt was slipping away.

"I'm scared too. But the only reason we're here...is because our Clanmates are fighting for us." Skylark looked around at the cats around them, and Twitchpaw thought she saw a slight smile cross the medicine cat's lips. "We got this."

Twitchpaw dipped her head, as Dustkit and Rainkit flashed in her mind. The kits were in safe paws. Part of her wished that she could have had that kind of security when she was that age—but now she could help the young cats too.

She took a deep breath. The cool air chilled her lungs and seemed to give her strength to go on. Twitchpaw met Skylark's bi-coloured eyes. "Yeah."

With new strength, the grey she-cat stepped forward and heard her meow sound firmly through the winter forest. "Claystar!" she called. "We need to talk to you!"

At the sound of her voice, the dark ginger tom appeared padding out of the trees. His eyes were dark and suspicious as he glanced down at Twitchpaw. "Who are you?" the MarshClan leader mewed disdainfully. "Shouldn't Sparkstar be the one to talk?"

But have you ever listened to him? Twitchpaw thought. She tried to steady her voice. "I am Twitchpaw, mediator of RobinClan."

"She speaks on behalf of Sparkstar!" Skylark added, stepping closer to her. "We both do. I am his medicine cat if you remember." Her blue and green eyes narrowed towards him.

Claystar looked uncertain for a moment before lashing his tail. "I do. What could you possibly have to say?" The leader stared at them expectantly. Around them, the chaos of the fight had died down as the cats turned their attention towards them. Twitchpaw caught sight of her Clanmates looking at her with encouragement.

"We'll stop this fight if you agree to stop hunting past Bigroots." She remembered what Skylark had told her about what the Darkspirit had shown her. "We are not a threat, but our cats need food too."

Claystar flicked his ears back, cloudy blue eyes flashing. "So? Leaf-bare is unpredictable! MarshClan needs to be able to support itself!" He glared at Skylark. "And quite literally, *you* were the ones asking for a fight!"

Twitchpaw lowered her head. "I promise, we will stop the fight as soon as you agree. Your cats will be safe."

The last few words seemed to get through to Claystar. He seemed speechless for a moment. "But Sandfern..." he murmured under his breath.

Skylark stepped forward, shooting a smile at Twitchpaw. "I think we're getting somewhere."

Twitchpaw hesitated, looking at Claystar. The one who had killed his own medicine cat to avenge his mate. She thought back to Splashpaw and Lichenpaw...they had only sorted things out when they were honest with each other. "I wish there were a way for him to talk to the Clanmates he lost," she murmured to Skylark.

Skylark brightened. "WishClan!" The medicine cat lifted her head to the sky as if expecting starry ancestors to come down any moment.

Twitchpaw blinked. "Are you sure..." *That they're real*? After all this time, she still hadn't had even a glimpse of WishClan.

But Skylark nodded firmly. "Trust me, Twitchpaw."

Twitchpaw's common sense was screaming at her to object, but another part told her that Skylark had been a kittypet like her too. If *she* believed in WishClan, then maybe that was proof enough.

The mediator apprentice stepped back.

Then something happened. A shooting star raced across the sky, streaking blue behind. The air shimmered and glowed, dancing with tiny shooting stars. Cat-like figures began to take shape, translucent and glowing. A dusky brown she-cat and a young sandy she-cat, no more than an apprentice. The dusky brown she-cat's fur was saturated with a vibrant red, and both of the spirits had majestic wings. *WishClan—oh my stars!* Twitchpaw could only stare in awe.

The MarshClan leader stared wide-eyed at her. "Sandfern!"

"Oh, Claystar." Sandfern mewed, touching her nose to his. "What are you doing?"

"I'm doing what I promised you." The dark ginger tom blinked at his mate. "Taking care of MarshClan. I'm doing everything I can to get us through this leaf-bare!"

"Still the loyal, strong warrior I knew, then." Sandfern purred with a hint of sorrow in her voice. "But you don't need to be so afraid of death, of losing cats. You don't need to threaten other cats for that."

"But—we need the land, and they're not even a proper Clan," Claystar protested.

"Yes, we are!" an indignant voice sounded from the bushes. *Squishypelt!* The ginger tom lifted his head, touching his muzzle to Creekstorm's proudly. "We are RobinClan! You know, my family used to live by a river and—" He was cut off by Creekstorm slapping a tail over his jaws, shaking her head fondly at him. Twitchpaw heard Tricklepaw groaning softly with embarrassment and purred.

Sandfern met Claystar's gaze. "Pearpaw and I are safe in WishClan. Waiting for you."

Claystar's blue eyes seemed to glisten. "I wish you didn't have to die."

"I chose to, for the good of the Clan." Sandfern touched her nose to her mate's, and Twitchpaw could see the leader unsure of how to react. "It was *my* decision."

"It's not your fault," Twitchpaw added softly.

Sandfern dipped her head in agreement. "We'll be reunited soon enough, my love. And if they're all just kittypets like you think...has RobinClan given up once during this battle?"

"No," Claystar admitted hesitantly. He sighed, resting his head on his mate's ghostly form. "Thank you for...coming."

"I believe there's someone else you need to talk to, Claystar," Skylark added, dipping her head to a dark, shadowy figure.

Chapter 23

Skylark had almost zoned out with the rush of battle clamour around her, but the WishClan cats' appearance had restored her confidence. And Skylark wasn't sure how, but now Mallowsight was standing in front of every cat.

Everyone could see the Darkspirit now.

The young she-cat spirit dipped her head to the older cat. Pearpaw's eyes glimmered as she huddled closer to Sandfern. "You may speak now, Mallowsight."

"Our power allows us to make Darkspirits seen, but only for a little while," Sandfern explained. "We only use it when it's important, if the future looks a little brighter in this direction."

Skylark was intrigued. But before she could ask them more, she was cut off by Claystar's growl. "Mallowsight."

"Claystar," the old MarshClan medicine cat hissed. "I can't believe you're still the same cat I knew."

"Me?" Claystar's voice rose. "You refused to cure Sandfern!"

"She didn't need herbs, she needed food!" Mallowsight argued. "And she gave it up for others in the Clan—you know that."

Sandfern stepped back, gazing into her mate's eyes. "He's right. *No cat* is responsible for my death, except me, and I was happy to do it! I don't think Redkit would have survived without the extra food!"

Claystar growled. "I'm just making sure this doesn't happen again. No cat has to die if RobinClan leaves the forest."

"But it wasn't *my* fault," Mallowsight mewed disdainfully. "Look, I'm just as sad as you about our Clanmates. But look, they're in WishClan and *I'm stuck here* because of you." Skylark shivered; she knew exactly what had happened. Claystar had killed the medicine

cat in a blur of rage. The Darkspirit's eyes glowed an ominous red. "You know what you did."

Claystar twitched his tail uneasily. "I'm sorry," he murmured so his Clan wouldn't hear. "I didn't mean to kill you. I needed someone to blame for all the deaths, and I chose you."

"That's all I needed to hear," Mallowsight rumbled satisfactorily. "You were always one to think with your claws first."

"Hey," Twitchpaw mewed, ears flattening a little as every cat turned to look at her. "We can always sort it out peacefully if the prey shortage leads to death again. But we can only do that if both Clans listen." She paused as Claystar looked away.

"Which is why we need mediators!" Trailblaze called out. He was limping heavily out from the bushes, Laurelcall supporting him. The gash was on his side, still fresh with blood. Yet he gave a warm glance at Twitchpaw. "That way we can help each other out without being at each other's throats."

"Such soft-hearted kittypets you are," Claystar mumbled, but his voice was less sharp than before. "I'll think about it—we can discuss it at the next gathering. But we're leaving now, so you'd better stop pushing the borders!" He lifted his tail to his Clan. "MarshClan, retreat!"

With a last touch of his muzzle and whisper to Sandfern, the MarshClan leader led his Clan away—and RobinClan was alone, silent once more, like birds being let out of their cages and hesitating at the open door.

Sandfern turned to Skylark with shining eyes. "Thank you. WishClan has a lot of power, but it is only tied to the real world thanks to medicine cats. It was your faith that allowed us to be here. We wouldn't have been able to come down without you."

Skylark felt her heart grow warm at the spirit's praise, but looked at the grey she-cat by her side and realised she hadn't done it alone. "It was Twitchpaw's idea."

Twitchpaw gave a purr, licking her chest fur to hide her embarrassment. "It was nothing. I just thought talking things out was the best way to go."

"You were right," Mallowsight had once been no more than a shadow, but now his dark form had cleared to show brown tabby markings underneath. "I think—I think I'm ready to move on." His spirit shone, and with a wisp of starlight, he glowed. Confused murmurs rang among the Clan, but Skylark knew what was happening. She was awestruck as the Darkspirit lifted, fading into light, his old self shedded from the darkness.

And then a whisper, just for her. "Thank you, Skylark. My Clan will be safe now." A vision of a smiling brown tom with amber eyes drifted in her mind, as Mallowsight joined Sandfern and Pearpaw and the spirits disappeared as fast as shooting stars.

"Skylark, what on earth was that!" Vixenpool darted toward her. "You just saved our home!" The ginger she-cat surrounded her excitedly. Skylark joined in her joyous purr, leaning into her friend's soft ginger fur.

"Is it over?" Eeveepaw glanced around in disbelief.

Mallowsight had ascended to WishClan. WishClan had come to help her, and she had helped save the Clan from being chased out of their home. For once Skylark was needed, *important*. She didn't think she would be when she first agreed to become a medicine cat all those moons ago. "It's over." Skylark looked down affectionately at the mediator apprentice by her side. "Well done, Twitchpaw!"

"You too," Twitchpaw purred with relief. "I thought I wouldn't believe my eyes when WishClan appeared, but...I guess I trusted you after all."

"RobinClan stays!" Moosebloom yowled in triumph. Lichenpaw joined her, followed by Mistleswoop, Puddlesoar, and even Kestrelflame.

As she joined the cheer, Skylark's heart felt so light, like she could sprout wings and fly like WishClan cats.

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Splashpaw ran up to Skylark and Twitchpaw, blue eyes shining. "I heard what happened! That was incredible." He nudged Skylark. "But we need to treat our Clanmates now. Some of them are really hurt."

Skylark nodded, grateful again for the young tom. He always took his training seriously and brought her back to reality. "Every injured cat, come over!" she yowled out, realising that climbing up to the medicine ash might be a hassle for everyone.

She and Splashpaw gathered a few herbs and poultices near the base of the medicine ash. Squishypelt, Eggnogshine, and Moosebloom padded over, all looking beaten up. Lying in some hasty nests were Trailblaze, Sparkstar, Lichenpaw, and...Sparrowberry. All three cats were badly injured, with gashes along their sides or bellies or claw marks in their fur. Sparrowberry especially was scarily still in the makeshift nest.

Skylark felt her heart drop. She hadn't been friends with the she-cat for very long—but Sparrowberry had always been so interested in her job as a medicine cat, so cheerful despite her disability, and so strong to lead a patrol into battle. Apart from Splashpaw, she had been the first in WishClan to make her feel the same way Avalanchefall once had. She placed a paw on her ribs—it was beating, but very weak.

If I helped stop the battle, I must be able to save my Clanmates too. She gathered the cobwebs and marigold, gently placing the herbs into Sparrowberry's dull fur. *Maybe horsetail will help...*

Just then, Sparrowberry's eyes opened slightly. Skylark's heart sped up with anticipation. "Hey," she whispered, touching her nose to the warrior. Sparrowberry's eyes brightened when she caught sight of Skylark. "You did great."

Trailblaze lit up when he saw Sparrowberry stir. "You're awake! Are you alright? You were so brave to lead that patrol." Sparrowberry gave a weak purr as she reached for the tom, letting their fur brush. The ginger-and-white tom laid his head on his mate's in reply.

"She was really brave," Alderwing meowed as she and Eeveepaw padded over, wincing at their injuries. "She let us all know where to go to confuse those MarshClan cats."

Eeveepaw blinked at his mentor. "We did pretty good together, huh?"

"We did." Alderwing gave a light purr.

Eeveepaw looked embarrassed. "I *might* have...said some mean things about you before," he admitted. "Sorry 'bout that."

Alderwing snorted. "No way, I couldn't tell."

"I wanted to be a great warrior," Eeveepaw replied. "I still do. I thought you were slowing me down, but you taught me a lot I guess."

"Wel, I know I succeeded." Alderwing gave her apprentice a shy smile. Eeveepaw grinned back at her.

Watching her Clanmates work together had been one of the best things Skylark had ever seen. Knowing *she* was a part of that—that was even better. *I thought I was alone in this role after Avalanchefall left.* But Splashpaw showed her that medicine cats could rely on other cats—Vix that even leaders of the Clan could enjoy their friendships—Sparrowberry that other cats were interested in her companionship.

Splashpaw blinked happily at her. "Nothing too bad. All our cats are going to recover in time." The young tom held up the empty leaf wrap. "I think we might need more cobwebs though."

"Thanks, Splashpaw," Skylark purred. "I'll go up to the medicine ash and get some."

She leaped up the familiar path to the medicine ash. A few cats were back—Vixenpool, Eggnogshine, Creekstorm and Tricklepaw, Mistleswoop and Puddlesoar, Crowpelt and Flashflood. Dustkit and Rainkit were jumping around their parents excitedly. Skylark smiled. They weren't about to leave now. They were safe, and the future of her Clan was now too.

She reached the medicine ash and while searching in the supply of herbs, Skylark noticed the poppy tucked in her shoulder fur. A reminder of the first friend she had ever had, the only one she thought she would ever have. She paused—then reached for it with her jaws and placed it on one of the herb-shelves. It looked alright there.

I can't wait to see you soon, she thought dreamily as the snow drifted beyond the ivy curtains. But either way, she knew that RobinClan was where she wanted to be. She was their medicine cat, and she wouldn't trade that for anything in the world.

Chapter 24

Twitchpaw yawned as she awoke slowly in her stick-woven nest, feeling Eeveepaw's tousled fur near hers as she sat up in the leaves. The air was cold and stormy outside, with the wind whistling. Beside her, Tricklepaw stirred, pushing his paws into Eeveepaw's happily.

"Argh, Tricklepaw!" Eeveepaw complained, rolling over. "Stop kicking me!"

"Then don't be so close!" Tricklepaw retorted. Twitchpaw hid a smile of amusement. After everything, it was surprising to remember the two apprentices had once fought by each other's sides in battle a few days ago. Some things never changed. Just then, Tricklepaw proceeded to jump out of his nest and race outside. "Oh my WishClan, it's our warrior ceremony today!"

Twitchpaw smiled. Without the threat of battle hanging over them anymore, Clan life was finally starting to return to normal.

"Oh, it is!" Eeveepaw sat up, shaking moss off his brown pelt. "Finally! Alderwing said she wanted one last hunt before we get our warrior names, so let's wake our mentors up!"

"I'm glad I'm not a warrior apprentice anymore," Twitchpaw mewed quietly. Even though she wouldn't work beside Eeveepaw anymore, she was doing something she loved.

Eeveepaw nudged her. "How can I be a super awesome feared warrior without you?"

"You were a super awesome feared warrior in that battle," Twitchpaw assured him. "You really showed them!" Her friend had grown from a kit who played pranks to a brave, strong cat, ready to be a warrior. She would miss their training days just as much as him, but they had served their purpose, and she would always be glad that she had gotten a chance to spend so much time with her

best friend.

"And *you* were the one who stopped it," Eeveepaw purred. "You were so brave to stand up to Claystar!"

Speaking of Claystar, there had been a Gathering a few days before. Twitchpaw had gone, and thankfully the MarshClan and RobinClan leaders had come to an agreement. MarshClan was allowed to hunt until Bigroots, but both mediators would have to agree if they needed to go further. Each Clan also had new mediators: Duskdream from MarshClan, Icedawn from SnowyClan, Bubblingsplash from CavernClan. Trailblaze had told her that they would meet sometimes to help the Clans settle disagreements and listen to their Clanmates if they needed someone to talk to. It sounded a little stressful, but much better than fighting or patrolling. And Twitchpaw liked helping other cats get along.

Lichenpaw sunk deeper into her nest. "I don't think Eggnogshine will want to be woken up in this weather." The dark ginger she-cat turned over and burrowed deeper in the moss.

"Oh, how lazy!" Tricklepaw purred, seeming delighted to for once, be more responsible for his training than his hardworking sister. "Don't be sleeping in during our warrior ceremonyyyy!"

If Lichenpaw heard him, she made no attempt to show it.

Eeveepaw darted along the branch of the birch tree. "Come on, Tricklepaw, don't be a slow slug!"

"I'm not! Slugs aren't tough," Tricklepaw huffed as he followed the other tom. Twitchpaw decided to go to the fresh-kill hole—maybe there was something there for the kits. Lately, Rainkit's favourite prey was mouse. It was more of a CavernClan thing for sure, but Puddlesoar, Chasecloud, and Kiteheart were all too happy to oblige. The kits were definitely going to grow up in a better environment than her.

She padded outside, leaping over to the Great Tree. Now that it was finally newleaf and the MarshClan cats were keeping to the border, the prey pile had grown significantly. Twitchpaw spotted Trailblaze

with Crowpelt and Laurelcall around him. She hadn't seen the three friends together in a while.

"You should have *seen* that squirrel!" Trailblaze was purring. His side was still pink from his wound and looked like it would end in a scar, but at least he was alive. "So juicy...but I missed! Sparrowberry almost caught it, though." He hesitated before adding, "How is upkeeping camp going?"

Crowpelt looked surprised at the question, and so did Laurelcall. "Actually, Eggnogshine got tangled up in some vines yesterday," the white tom mewed with a chuckle. "Don't know how the guy does it. Flashflood had to cut them with her claws to get him out."

Trailblaze laughed. "Eggnogshine is funny." The warrior's face turned more serious as he lowered his voice. "By the way, are you and Flashflood...official yet?"

Laurelcall's white pelt glowed with a hint of pink. "You heard about that?" He shot a furtive look at Crowpelt, who shook his head subtly as if to say *I didn't tell, why are you looking at me?* Laurelcall glanced away, but he was smiling. "Pretty much, but we don't want to tell everyone yet. Flashflood would kill me!" He then blinked at the warrior. "How is it going with Sparrowberry?"

Trailblaze immediately licked at his chest fur. "Good. I mean, how could it not be? She's *only* the most talented and funny and smartest she-cat in existence..."

"Aaahh, all these she-cats," Crowpelt yawned and stretched his body out, shaking his pelt of leaves before standing up. "I'd rather go on patrol. See ya later." With a touch to Trailblaze's shoulder, he padded away to join Chasecloud's patrol.

Twitchpaw spotted a mouse in the fresh-kill hole and smiled; Rainkit would be happy about that. She held it in her jaws and carried it towards the nursery willow. The youngest of the Clan had already reached their sixth moon. *Not long until they're apprentices!* She wondered what they would become—a warrior, defender, medicine cat, or mediator? They both had a lot of options and a whole future ahead of them. *And a whole Clan to care for them until*

then.

"Twitchpaw!" Dustkit squeaked as she padded through the tendrils. The colourpoint jumped off Kiteheart's back and ran up to her. "Is that a mouse?"

"Of course!" she purred.

Rainkit trotted over, grey eyes glowing. Twitchpaw dropped it on the branch and the kits wolfed it down hungrily. After the leaf-bare they had just had, it must have been as good as a juicy robin.

Kiteheart smiled at her. After the battle, the defender had decided to be a nursery king instead, and help care for kits. "They heard about your warrior ceremony today," the tabby meowed in his low voice. His red bandana fluttered in the wind as he talked. "It's *all* Dustkit's talked about all day."

Twitchpaw laughed. "They won't have to wait long to be apprenticed themselves!" She remembered how scared she had once been to be a warrior apprentice and was glad it wouldn't be the same for Dustkit and Rainkit.

Just then, Splashpaw popped his head in. "Hey, Twitchpaw, Rainy, Dusty! Kiteheart, how's that tail healing?" The medicine cats had been extra busy after the battle with treating injured cats.

Kiteheart showed him, wincing. Splashpaw frowned and reached into his leaf wrap for a poultice, which he rubbed into the brown tom's soft fur. Rainkit blinked innocently up at the medicine cat apprentice. "Are you going to get your medicine cat name too, Splashpaw?"

Splashpaw didn't take his eyes off Kiteheart's tail. There was a pause. Twitchpaw wondered too—he never was the most open about his training.

"I think my training will last a couple of moons longer," Splashpaw finally mewed. He wrapped a leaf over Kiteheart's tail. "Tell me if that starts hurting again." Kiteheart dipped his head in thanks.

Twitchpaw followed Splashpaw out of the nursery. She wasn't sure

what to say, should she say anything, as the mediator? As his friend?But she kept quiet as they padded back toward the medicine ash.

But Splashpaw stopped at the elders' rowan. "I want to check on them," he explained. "Besides, I haven't heard their stories in a while."

Twitchpaw touched her nose to his, silently wishing that he could get his name with them too. What would he think of Lichenpaw and Tricklepaw moving up without him? *WishClan knows Lichenpaw would have had a hard time with that if they swapped places.*

Splashpaw's eyes glimmered with unspoken thanks. "See you later, Twitchpaw."

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"Is it time!" Eeveepaw was yowling as he danced his way to camp. A few birds went flapping out the branches at his joyous voice. A sparrow hung from his jaws as he padded up the Great Tree beside Alderwing, Kestrelflame, and Tricklepaw. "Wake up Sparkstar!"

"We're gonna be warriors!!" Tricklepaw screamed, his voice unusually high-pitched from the 'tough' voice he had adopted over his moons of training with Kestrelflame.

The two apprentices hurtled onto the branch she was on, sending Twitchpaw nearly flying over the edge.

"Great job, Tricklepaw!" Squishypelt ran up to his kit, purring. "You too, Eeveepaw and Twitchpaw!"

"And Lichenpaw." Eggnogshine's blue eyes shone as he padded into the meeting area beside his apprentice.

Moosebloom circled Lichenpaw excitedly. "Congrats!"

Soon, Twitchpaw heard Sparkstar's voice echoing through camp. As all cats gathered on the Great Tree, Twitchpaw felt thrills run down her spine. She saw pride glowing in Trailblaze's expression. *I can't believe it...*

"Today is a special day. We are going to welcome four new members of the Clan!" Twitchpaw's heart skipped as she gazed up breathlessly at the Tallbranch. The first time she had been there for a ceremony, she had been terrified.

"I, Sparkstar, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn."

"Eeveepaw, Lichenpaw, Twitchpaw, Tricklepaw. Do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Lichenpaw mewed immediately.

"I do," Tricklepaw added, his voice as deep as his mentor Kestrelflame's.

Eeveepaw was smiling like he had just caught the fattest piece of fresh-kill in leaf-bare. He puffed up his chest. "I do!"

Twitchpaw gazed at her Clanmates. This was it—they were officially full members of the Clan. She was going to be the *mediator*. For a moment she questioned if it was a dream; if she would soon wake up and be in her bare kittypet bed in that empty Twoleg den again. Or maybe in the large den with cats all around.

But nothing could be more right than standing here, being welcomed by her Clan who had fought together over a home they only spent a couple of seasons in.

"I do."

Sparkstar gave the slightest nod, his olive eyes glinting with pride. "Then by the powers of WishClan, I give you your warrior names. Lichenpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Lichenwhisker. WishClan honours your loyalty and perseverance." He rested his muzzle on the apprentice's head, and the former apprentice licked the leader's shoulder. Lichenwhisker was glowing with joy as the Clan cheered her name, the defenders yowling the loudest.

"Tricklepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Tricklestorm." The tom's blue eyes lit with excitement at his new name, but he just adjusted his stance. "You have grown into a rather strong cat under Kestrelflame. WishClan honours your bravery and..." The leader paused as he searched the crowd, his gaze landing on Kestrelflame. "And—toughness!" Sparkstar finished. Kestrelflame gave a firm nod, and Tricklestorm flicked his tail rapidly with joy.

"Eeveepaw." Sparkstar looked at her friend with fondness in his eyes. Somehow the young brown tom had won the serious leader over. "You shall be known as Eeveeflight. I knew Alderwing would train you well." At that, the calico warrior lashed her tail happily. "WishClan honours your enthusiasm and courage."

Twitchpaw's heart warmed. She leaned against him, giving him a soft purr of congratulations as Mistleswoop and Puddlesoar led the cheer. *Eeveeflight's suffix was given after his mentor,* she realised. Would it be the same for her too? *Twitchfire, Twitchflame.* She wondered which one would be hers.

"Twitchpaw," Sparkstar looked her way. She felt her fur rise along her back in anticipation. When she had first met him in that large Twoleg den, she never thought this was the way her life would turn out. "Our new, and the Clans' very first mediator. You and Skylark did well in stopping the battle. I am glad you found a place in RobinClan." Twitchpaw purred softly. "I name you Twitchshade. WishClan honours your kindness and determination. We welcome all four of you as full members of RobinClan!"

"Twitchshade! Eeveeflight! Tricklestorm! Lichenwhisker!" the Clan yowled.

Perfect. A purr rose in Twitchshade's throat as her Clanmates cheered her new name, welcoming her at last to the place she knew was home.

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Twitchshade breathed in the sweet night air as she sat beside Eeveeflight and Lichenwhisker. Darkness used to scare her. Now it

felt only peaceful, comforting.

"Goodnight, *warriors*!" Moosebloom meowed, winking at them.

"We are very, very proud of you," Creekstorm gazed at her kits lovingly and touched her nose to Tricklestorm and Lichenwhisker. "Guard the camp well tonight." Squishypelt did the same, purring approvingly.

Trailblaze whisked his tail over his former apprentice's head. "See you in the warriors' chestnut tomorrow!" Although she wasn't a warrior, Twitchshade was still going to sleep with the other warriors. The thought excited her. She was still going to be with Eeveeflight and Tricklestorm, although she would miss Lichenwhisker, who was moving into the defenders' acacia. Twitchshade purred at her former mentor. The cat who led her on this path, who she had risked everything to help in battle. She couldn't even begin to express her thanks to him. *See you,* she signed.

"Keep being tough," Kestrelflame meowed to Tricklestorm. "You've done well." The fawn tom dipped his head to his former mentor, a purr rumbling in his throat.

"Splashpaw—" Lichenwhisker meowed hesitantly. Twitchshade stiffened as Splashpaw turned, his eyes looking exhausted. After so long of Lichenwhisker feeling like she was left behind by her brother, now the roles were reversed. She felt a wave of sadness for the medicine cat apprentice. He had been with them every step of the way.

"It's okay, Lichenwhisker," Splashpaw whispered. "I'm happy for you."

The dark ginger she-cat straightened, looking shocked. "But aren't you..." she trailed off, leaf-green eyes faltering.

"Jealous?" Splashpaw shook his head. "Of course I wish I could sit vigil with you tonight. But you've earned this." He touched his nose to his sister's. "You have always been so determined, especially during that flood."

Lichenwhisker let out a soft purr. "I'm so sorry, Splash." Her eyes were wide. "I never meant to hurt you. You're right, I didn't understand. I could have...killed you that day."

"Thank you." Splashpaw looked at his hind leg, where the scars were still healing. "But you more than made it up to me." The medicine cat scanned the new defender's body, eyes running over the claw-marks and dried blood in her fur.

"I know." Lichenwhisker hesitated before touching her cheek to her brother's. "Get some sleep, Splash. It won't be long till you catch up."

Splashpaw nodded briefly, padding away. He leaned over to whisper to Twitchshade as his fur brushed hers. "Congrats, Twitch*shade*."

"Thank you," Twitchshade replied. She looked into his eyes, hoping he could tell that she was thanking him for more than the congratulations.

The dilute tortoiseshell tom gave them a sideways smile. "Guard the camp well! We're counting on you!" With that, he was climbing down to the medicine ash.

The amount of trust in his voice made her smile. Twitchshade found herself leaning on Eeveeflight. She could feel his purr vibrating as they watched stars light up the sky and snow begin to fall. Slowly, she felt the memory of her kithood slip away into the darkness, as she felt herself covered by feathery wings.

Epilogue

Birds were chirping overhead, singing melodious songs to each other. *Newleaf is finally here!*

Splashfrost busied himself with sorting out the herb pile, reaching into the familiar divot in the ash trunk. "Morning, Skylark," he greeted his mentor as she padded into the den, carrying a yellow flower in her mouth. Skylark glanced at him, mismatched eyes revealing a hint of a smile. "Hello, Splashpaw."

"Splash*frost*," he reminded her proudly. *I'm a full medicine cat now, like Hurricanespark!*

"Oh, sorry!" Skylark shook her head. "Splashfrost. I was just talking to some Darkspirits—a couple of them, actually. They weren't as...nice as Mallowsight."

Splashfrost let out a purr. "Yeah, that's *exactly* the word to describe him."

"I know," Skylark replied. "But I guess they're Darkspirits for a reason." She blinked at him with sympathetic eyes. "Sorry you can't talk to them anymore."

Splashfrost nodded. He didn't know why, but his connection with the Darkspirits had always been a little weak. "I saw them a lot when I was injured, but they haven't appeared in my dreams since before the battle."

Skylark tilted her head slightly. "Well, either way, I wouldn't want to be a medicine cat without you."

Splashfrost smiled, his worries scattering. "I'm just glad we got to see Mallowsight in WishClan. He looks so happy!" The tabby tom had been at his medicine cat ceremony. His pelt had emitted a deep blue colour, and he seemed finally peaceful surrounded by old friends.

The medicine cats headed out to the Great Tree to get some prey, just like they always did in the morning. He saw Rainpaw, now an apprentice to Squishypelt, setting off on his first patrol alongside Vixenpool and her apprentice Dustpaw. Rainpaw was fidgeting with excitement. "I want to be a warrior as soon as possible!" he stated.

"Just like Eeveeflight," Dustpaw added.

Squishypelt waved his tail to his apprentice. "Calm down, young ones. You know, the last batch were apprentices before you were even born. So young, I remember it like it was yesterday!"

"Well, *I* don't." Rainpaw had hopped to the next branch impatiently. "Let's go!"

Eeveeflight purred from nearby. "You know, as long as you're not slacking, there really isn't a need to speedrun your apprenticeship."

They were both already such zealous apprentices. Splashfrost looked down at his leg, which had broken when he fell out of Sunningtree. Now he walked with a limp, and tiny scars still ran over his fur from that day.

At least Lichenwhisker had apologized. When he was still recovering, he had pleaded with Skylark to allow him to take the Leap of Faith with the other apprentices.

"I'll think about it," Skylark had hedged before stepping away from his nest, heading to meet with Twitchpaw.

Splashpaw had curled in his nest, emotion spilling over in soft whimpers now that he was by himself. The thought of being left alone was something he had never considered before, and his chest aches with loneliness.

"Splashpaw?"

He recognized the voice of his sister. Lichenpaw padded up to his nest, lacking the confidence that often radiated from her tortoiseshell pelt. "Are you okay?"

Splashpaw could have pushed his feelings away and smiled and assured

her that he was fine. But the desperation in his heart seemed to have stripped his people-pleasing instincts away, and he choked out, "no" and closed his eyes to shut out Lichenpaw's expression as he kept going. "Why couldn't you understand? Why didn't you try to stop me from falling? I don't get it—you're my sister—"

"Splash," Lichenpaw cut in. Splashpaw opened his eyes to realise her green eyes blazed with intensity. "I'm so, so sorry. I haven't been able to sleep for days. Every time I think about what happened...it should have been me. I only wanted to protect our family, and look where that got you!" The tortoiseshell lashed out a claw in frustration, sending herbs flying. "Why? Why wasn't it me?"

"Don't say that!" Splashpaw felt shock and a fierce warmth of love for her washing over him. "Please. I'm glad you're safe, Lichen."

"You could have died, after all we went through with the flood!" Lichenpaw's voice had escalated to a yowl. Splashpaw had never seen her that distressed before. He met her frantic gaze, and curled his neck around hers, letting her lean into him as she whispered, "I hate seeing you like this, brother."

"Don't worry about me," Splashpaw meowed softly, his heart breaking. "I'm recovering...but I do want to know why you hated us helping MarshClan." The question had plagued his mind ever since the incident, circling non-stop in his head.

Lichenpaw looked away. "I was jealous. I felt like you were gatekeeping your medicine cat secrets because you never told me about them, not when they might be useful in case...in case of another flood. I was angry for RobinClan, but also because you seemed to care more for another Clan than me." She peered up at him guiltily. "Can you forgive me?"

Splashpaw had wished he could agree right then and there, but the words caught in his throat. He hated the resentment that still snaked in his heart. "I'm sorry, I still need some space," he admitted. "But thank you, Lichenpaw..."

Lichenwhisker has already saved my life, Splashfrost now reminded himself, trying to process what had happened that day. *I guess it is true what she said—we both kept each other alive during the battle.*

He stepped closer to Eeveeflight and Twitchshade. The mediator's green eyes lit up as she saw them, making Splashfrost's heart race.

This is so mouse-brained, he scolded himself silently, though his heart didn't get the message. He loved her, and not in the same way as Skylark...although he would never tell her that. He had to focus on his Clanmates and his duties. That had always been his main goal since he found his role in RobinClan. He had once been so focused on that that Lichenwhisker had gotten frustrated at him closing her off.

But Twitchshade was the one who visited him most in the medicine ash when he was hurt, and she was so brave and caring towards everyone. Now that newleaf was almost here...and he had gotten his medicine cat name...Splashfrost had been thinking about her more and more.

She's my friend for goodness sake, he thought, trying to leave it as that. Just as she had always been.

A super awesome fantastic one, his brain argued.

"I'm about to visit Duskdream, Bubblingsplash, and Icedawn," Twitchshade explained as she hastily licked tufts of her grey fur flat, referring to the other Clans' mediators. "Being a mediator is exhausting!"

"I'm sure," Splashfrost meowed sympathetically, hoping that he sounded understanding. "Good luck, Twitchshade. Maybe you'll make friends!"

Eeveeflight nudged the mediator. "Don't get *too* friendly, though! They need to know not to mess with RobinClan."

Twitchshade whacked him over the head with her tail. "You're starting to sound like Tricklestorm."

"Ow," Eeveeflight whined jokingly. Looking at them, Splashfrost felt a hint of envy. He knew it was silly, but sometimes he wished *he* was Twitchshade's best friend.

Skylark headed off towards the nursery willow where Sparrowberry

was expecting Trailblaze's kits. With Kiteheart as a nursery king, the nursery was as packed as it had ever been. All that made Splashfrost wonder if *he* would have kits one day.

He knew medicine cats were allowed to have mates. It would be no trouble at all since Skylark was also a full medicine cat. But if he had learned anything from his argument with Lichenwhisker, it was that sometimes his Clanmates mattered more than the healing itself. And he cared about Twitchshade. He wished he could wrap his tail around her and make sure she knew she wasn't alone, despite having a rank that no other cat in the Clan had before.

As Twitchshade began darting towards the ground with graceful ease, Splashfrost turned to Eeveeflight. He was Twitchshade's best friend, after all, so maybe he could help him figure out his emotions. "Do you want to go herb picking with me? You can hunt if you like. I might want to talk to you about something."

His friend nodded eagerly, not questioning him. The two young cats headed out of camp, climbing towards another tree beyond. Flowers were blooming all around, breaking free from their leaf-bare spell. Splashpaw knew that Skylark loved them—the medicine ash had recently been decorated passionately with bright flowers, starting from a singular poppy and being added to until the whole ash tree smelled sweeter than ever. *They are really pretty!*

Beside him, Eeveeflight dove for a white dove, catching it between his paws with ease. "Alderwing focused a lot on hunting at the start of my training," Eeveeflight explained when he caught Splashfrost looking at it in wonder. "Enough stalling! So, what were you going to tell me?"

No point hesitating now. "Eeveeflight, I think I like Twitchshade," Splashfrost mewed, embarrassment heating his dilute tortoiseshell fur.

Eeveeflight turned to him and purred loudly. "Are you serious? Like, *like* her?" He twitched his tail mischievously. "I don't know about that, friend. She's the mediator, and you're the medicine cat. How long has this been going on?"

"Not long..." It was true. The feelings had only started when she had started visiting him since his accident. She was his *friend.* This was absurd. He needed to stop thinking this way about her. Splashfrost searched Eeveeflight's violet gaze. "But do *you*...do you like her...like that?"

"What? No," Eeveeflight laughed. "Twitchshade's my best friend. But I certainly never thought about her like that, despite what some cats think!" His expression turned grim for a moment. "I'm serious, people are actually shipping us."

That made Splashfrost's heart spark with hope. *I still have a chance.* Then he shook his head at himself—why did he even want a chance? "Do you think she...might want a mate?" he asked shyly.

Eeveeflight thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, she's never brought up wanting a mate before...but you should ask her yourself, herb-brain!"

Splashfrost purred, half at the nickname and half at the prospect of getting to talk to the grey she-cat. After meowing his thanks to Eeveeflight, the medicine cat was on his way back to camp. He picked a few marigold flowers on the way and made sure to gather a few flowers for Skylark before heading toward the medicine ash. *I need to take my mind off her for a while.* His ice-blue eyes scanned the piles of herbs. *I suppose I could reorganise them a bit.* Splashfrost allowed himself to get lost in his work. It was what he loved most about being a medicine cat. Even the most boring jobs made him feel special and part of the Clan. But soon enough he heard a rustling of leaves outside.

Twitchshade! His heart sped up, and Splashfrost paced forward as he saw her coming back from her meeting. Twitchshade glanced upwards, giving him half a smile. Her tail was drooping as she pulled up to Splashfrost. Splashfrost tried to calm his wildly beating heart.

"You look...tired," he observed. *Maybe this isn't the best time to confess.* "Are you okay?"

"I kind of am." Twitchshade sighed, leaning into his fur. It made

happy shivers run down his spine. *But I can't tell her that!* "I love being a mediator, but it's a little stressful!"

"I get that," he mewed instead. "I was so anxious last leaf-bare when Skylark and I found out what the Darkspirit was trying to tell us."

Twitchshade gave a worn-out smile. "There are a lot of similarities, aren't there? Between being a medicine cat and mediator." She straightened up to look at him. "I'm glad you get it, Splashfrost. I'm so lucky to have a friend like you."

A friend... the words pierced him like thorns. But he *was* her friend and Clanmate...so what else did he need? Maybe he would ask her when all her mediator stuff settled down a bit. But he had to admit that just being there for her now, when she was always there for everyone else, felt pretty good.

Splashfrost wrapped his tail around her, relishing in the moment. "Me too."

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Claystar sniffed the air. Good, it was finally newleaf. This leaf-bare had been hard, yet not as hard as the previous one. *Not that it could get any worse than my mate dying from hunger,* he thought cynically. Though...even as part of him wanted to believe that leaf-bare and Mallowsight had snatched her life away from both of them, he reluctantly admitted to himself that she had seemed just as beautiful and healthy as ever in WishClan.

Scruffyheart had faced Claystar after the battle, amber eyes flashing in disbelief. "*You* killed Mallowsight?" he had growled, claws unsheathing. A rare sight for the kind, loyal medicine cat. Claystar twitched his tail uncomfortably remembering it. How had he messed up this badly? The plan to chase RobinClan out of no-cat's land had failed, and the whole battle had been for nothing...

No. He had seen Sandfern and Pearpaw again, and they were safe in WishClan. Those sweet hazel eyes had reflected all the love for his Clan back at him.

RobinClan wasn't the problem, he admitted reluctantly. Twitchshade and Duskdream had eventually sorted everything out, stating that they would come to an agreement if such a situation ever happened again. Claystar had never dreamed of asking other Clans for help before. *There are different Clans for a reason!*

But Claystar couldn't deny that all his cats *had* made out of this leaf-bare alive. And it hadn't even been thanks to him!

"You don't deserve to be leader," Scruffyheart had hissed. The words stung him to his core, especially from his medicine cat. He opened his mouth to deny it. He had led MarshClan into a carefully calculated battle. He was sure RobinClan wouldn't put up much of a fight. *But they had.* Like a flock of eagles, the cats had been a surprisingly strong match. And maybe he had put his cats in danger after all.

He still remembered the rage that filled him the day Sandfern had died. He hated it. He knew, subconsciously, that it was his fault. He should have been a better deputy. And Mallowsight had come in the midst of all of it, calm and cool as a salmon. He felt a growl rise in his throat, but it came out as a sigh. *Mallowsight was my Clanmate too, and I killed him.* If he would go as far as to kill his own medicine cat, who was he to be the leader?

"You're right," he muttered to Scruffyheart, guilt pricking his stomach. "You know what? I think I might let another cat take my place." He could hardly believe the words that came out of his mouth. Claystar had once been so proud when Oakstar appointed him deputy—so eager to protect his Clanmates. The dark ginger tabby had promised earnestly to defend his Clan at the cost of his life.

But I guess I didn't.

Scruffyheart looked stunned as his claws sheathed. "Are you sure?"

The dark ginger tabby bowed his head. "I cannot keep them safe as leader."

He just hoped it wasn't too late for his wish to come true.

Scruffyheart stared at the leader for a long while before dipping his head. He gestured toward the entrance of the den with his fluffy tail. "Better call a Clan meeting, then."

Claystar padded outside. He felt dazed, his step lighter than it had been in a long time. He wouldn't have to make decisions for everyone anymore. He wouldn't have to take matters into his own paws or feel so guilty for every cat's death. *I can care for MarshClan much better as a warrior.*

He thought he felt a whisper of a ghost, a shimmer of a spirit beside him as he climbed onto the Highrock. The sweetest voice he knew, waiting for him.

Thank you for taking care of them for me.

THANK YOU

I started the first version of this back in 2022—and I am finally done with the story I've always wanted to tell! Thank you so much for reading Twitchshade and Skylark's story, hope you enjoyed reading as much as I did writing <33

Honestly, this was always meant to be a wholesome and chill book, focusing on the dynamics of the Clan and internal character struggles rather than defeating a bad guy. It's silly, but I hope it made you smile :3

To everyone on the blog who read this: Magpiepaw/heart, Solarpaw/flare, Dusklight, Spiritflight, Aspenpaw/song, my awesome apprentice Scorchpaw/light, Amberleaf, Frogpaw, and Jasminepaw/song, tysm! I really appreciate yall <333

Please consider voting and commenting! I'd love to see what you think :D